10
ようこそ
じつりょく
しじょうしゅぎ
のきょうしつへ
ようこそ実力至上主義の教室へ
衣笠彰梧
トモセシュンサク

Illustrations

「俺に話があると言っていたな。聞こう」
ここで兄との仲直りをするためだとでも口にすれば、そこで話し合いは終了する。
学は迷わず立ち去るつもりだった。
以前の鈴音であれば、そう答えてもおかしくはなかった。
「今日兄さんに話がしたかったこと、それは……私に――勇気をください」

「ねえ綾小路くん」
「ん？」
「綾小路くんって……ひょっとして凄い人？」

Prologue

“The Monologue of Yōsuke Hirata”

To me, my classmates are important existences.

…No, that’s not quite right.

To me, my class is the important one.

I know very well the contradiction within that statement.

To protect my important friends, I have to protect the class.

If I can protect the class, I can protect my friends.

The class is a gathering of several students. There are as many different ways of thinking as there are the number of people. They start fighting each other over the most insignificant things.

That’s why I have to protect them.

Eventually, protecting my class became my duty.

However— that’s not my true self.

I was never the center of my class originally. Instead, my existence was that of a shadow.

Using Class C as an example, I may have been similar to Ayanokōji-kun perhaps.

That’s why I sometimes see him overlapping with my previous self.

But I changed.

After that incident, there was no way I wouldn’t.

When I was little, I had a very good friend. A friend who was

together with me from kindergarten to middle school. He was being bullied without me noticing and ended up attempting suicide.

No, the fact that he's still alive is pure coincidence.

Him dying wouldn't be strange at all.

That day.

From that day on, my life began to change.

I began to think of how to get rid of bullying.

But I failed.

The class was being pinned down because they were making the wrong choices. The fights within the class itself have disappeared, but at the same time, so did the smiles. And then, yet again, the same thing was about to happen right in front of me. I cannot let the same mistake repeat itself. That was the single answer I reached.

The only way to protect this class.

That is—

The scene spreading out in front of me was filled with my classmates watching me with surprise on their faces.

"Horikita… can you shut up a bit."

Words containing no signs of intelligence.

Vulgar and full of violence. My own words.

A voice far from anger or sadness.

My classmates, including Horikita-san, look at me strangely.

That doesn't matter.

At this stage, it doesn't matter anymore.

At the very end of this worst special exam.

I, I—

Chapter 1: The Calm Before the Storm

Introduction

It was finally the first of March, a few days after the end-of-term exams.

Monday, the day where everyone was anxiously waiting for the results to be announced.

After all, in the case of a failing grade, the only option left was expulsion.

“Sensei, are you gonna announce the results now!?”

Unable to sit still any longer, Ike practically fell out of his seat as he waited for the homeroom teacher, Chabashira, to respond.

“Calm yourself. You’ll know in a couple of minutes.”

Chabashira, with practiced movements, spread out a large piece of paper she brought in on the blackboard.

This school would usually release our grades digitally, like on our cell phones or on the online forums. However, when it comes to the exams where expulsion was at stake, the teachers would display the results to us like this.

“Are you feeling confident, Ike?”

“O-oh well, yeah, I studied pretty hard, but…”

“You studied hard, huh? Yet you’re still so uneasy?”

Chabashira must have found his reply more amusing than surprising, as she gave off a slight smile.

For Ike, who usually gets low scores, it was only natural that he would feel anxious no matter how much he studied.

“Sudō, you always seem to be in the running for the lowest score, so

how are you feeling?”

It wouldn’t be surprising for Sudō to be the most anxious student in the classroom.

Considering the previous tests, it was no exaggeration to say that Sudō’s scores were some of the lowest in almost every subject. Chabashira was probably expecting a reply similar to Ike’s, but his response was something far more unexpected.

“…I’m confident at the very least. I absolutely won’t get a failing grade.”

“Oh?”

Despite the fact that physical prowess was Sudō’s only redeeming quality, his expression and tone of voice still managed to hold a distinct air of confidence.

Of course, I suppose he would still be anxious about the results, just like Ike.

However, thanks to the effort he’s put in to overcome that anxiety and the experience he’s accumulated, he’s been able to establish confidence.

This was what Horikita’s repeated study sessions had burned into his head. It was different compared to what he was capable of back when his entire strategy for academics consisted of superficially cramming the information the night before. Little by little the seeds of knowledge had begun to grow.

As the teacher who guided Sudō’s studies, Horikita’s face remained unclouded.

Well, she did seem somewhat displeased with how Sudō was getting ahead of himself.

“Hmm… It’s pretty interesting to see how you kids have grown. There’s no way to figure out just what you’ll accomplish next, and you’ve all easily surpassed my expectations. Now, I suppose I’ll announce the results of your end-of-term exams.”

Chabashira began posting test results onto the paper on the blackboard.

And after this, she would draw a red line across the results.

Anyone whose name falls below that line would be forcibly expelled from the school.

“The results this time-”

With a red pen in hand, Chabashira pressed the tip against the paper and drew a horizontal line.

The red line of fate.

And the number of students whose names fell below it was… zero.

In other words…

“Everyone successfully passed the exam. These have been your best results so far.”

Chabashira revealed that everyone in Class C passed.

“All right!”

Ike was the first to cry out.

It seemed like he was pretty afraid to hear the results. After all, Ike had the lowest score in the class.

“Well, that wasn’t too hard. Hahahaha… That was close!”

Ike spoke, his attention concentrated on his name and the red line directly under it.

“I only studied a little bit the day before and I still managed to pass.”

Yamauchi said as much, yet his name was listed right above Ike’s.

“Don’t lie Haruki, you were studying every day in desperation, weren’t you?”

“Is that so? Wahahaha!”

At any rate, both Ike and Yamauchi had successfully managed to pass the exam, so nobody had any complaints.

Chabashira watched over such a scene with a gentle gaze.

Nevertheless, the results were surprising.

Ike came in last, with Yamauchi coming up right behind him. They were followed by Hondō, Satō, and Inogashira.

Sudō’s name was right above Inogashira’s.

Considering Sudou’s results so far, it could be said that he’s seen some substantial improvement.

“Sudō. This past year, you managed to improve your grades better than anyone. You seemed confident that you’d pass as well. I’m looking forward to seeing how you’ll succeed in the future.”

Chabashira appeared to share my feelings on the matter.

“Heh. It’s nothing special.”

Despite saying that, he looked pleased with how well he did.

On the other side of things, the students taking the positions at the top were pretty much the same as usual.

Coming in first was Keisei, and second place was held by Kōenji. Keisei had been getting good grades from the start, and with how diligent he is with his studies, it was only natural that he’d outrank the rest of the class. However, Kōenji was still as much of a mystery as ever. He was never studying, and he didn’t interact with anyone else, either. If he utilized the full extent of his abilities, then he just may have the potential to surpass even Keisei. Because of all the small fluctuations in Kōenji’s test results so far, it’s possible that, depending on the exam, he’s slacking off when he doesn’t think it’s worth his time. Horikita was ranked third. She usually trailed a bit behind in English, but this time she scored much higher. She had probably gotten a lot better thanks to the time she spent tutoring

Sudō.

“Sensei, how did the other classes do?”

“They’ve all pulled through just like you did. In terms of the average score per class, Class C came in 3rd.”

There was no reason to ask which class came in first, second, and fourth respectively.

“As I thought, it seems we’ll have to aim higher if we want to overtake the upper classes.”

Without a hint of complacency, Horikita started writing down everyone’s scores.

The students at the top were just short of perfect scores, so further improvement wasn’t an option. In fact, the only option they had left was to focus on improving the scores of the students at the bottom.

“Good job with Sudō. I’m impressed.”

“It’s the result of his own hard work after all. All I did was thoroughly break down each of his weaknesses until he started to see success.”

Just like Horikita, Sudō’s weakest subject was English, yet he was still seeing quite a bit of improvement with his scores.

This improvement clearly showed that the two of them had focused their efforts on English during their studies.

“I wonder if he’s capable of bumping up his score a bit higher next time. Of course, it all depends on whether or not he can continue to concentrate.”

That was a pointless thing to worry about. After all, as long as Horikita was around, Sudō would continue to give it his all.

He was probably beginning to get the hang of studying by now.

He might even be able to squeeze into the upper half of the class

soon.

“It looks like Ike-kun and Yamauchi-kun still have a bit of space between their scores and the red line. It was probably the right decision for us to routinely hold study sessions. If a certain you-know-who next to me would actually put in the smallest amount of effort, our class’s average score might go up a little bit more, now wouldn’t it?”

“This is my limit.”

As usual, my scores were neither good nor bad. This time, I came in at 18th place.

“I’m not going to accept that. One day I’m going to make you take this seriously.”

“I’ll try my hardest in order to live up to your expectations.”

In any case, it was great that everyone was able to overcome the exam this time as well.

The students who had just barely managed to pass the exams were all clearly relieved that they were over. Ike and Yamauchi had even already begun joking around with each other.

Chabashira watched over her homeroom class with a tender gaze.

“I have to hand it to you guys. It may be a simple thing to say, but well done.”

It was usually pretty rare for Chabashira to praise her own class, but it seemed like it had been occurring more often recently. She probably had a hunch that everyone would pass the end-of-term exams in the first place.

“We did it!”

“Nevertheless Ike, you’re getting a bit too excited. Special exams aside, at an academic level, it’s only natural for you to pass an exam like this one. And besides, this exam wasn’t nearly as difficult as other national-level exams.”

Compared to the written exams we had taken so far, the difficulty of this particular exam was definitely higher.

However, the school sets the difficulty of the exams close to the student's current skill level. It seems like it's all for the purpose of maintaining appearances.

"Well, it can't be helped, but now that the good news is out of the way…"

Chabashira cut into the cheerful atmosphere that had been filling the classroom, immediately replacing it with something much heavier.

It was the usual display.

"Most of you were probably already aware of this, but just because you've finished this end-of-term exam doesn't mean that testing has finished for the year. There will be a particularly important special exam soon, and as in previous years, it's scheduled to begin on March 8th."

Chabashira explained what we should expect moving forward.

Speaking of March 8th, that's next Monday, isn't it?

We had just finished with the end-of-term exam, so a final special exam taking place so soon afterward wasn't unreasonable by any means. After all, it was the last thing left on the school's schedule for the year.

Furthermore, third-year students would apparently have to take yet another exam in tandem with the one next week.

"Everyone. This next special exam will be the last one this year. Let's all work together and try our best. If we do, our class should be able to aim for class A without anyone being expelled."

Hirata's encouraging words seemed to spread amongst the class, with many students speaking up to show their support.

Chabashira watched over the scene, revealing a vaguely relieved smile.

“The way things have been going recently, I’m starting to think that all of you might just be able to graduate together two years from now.”

With these parting words, Chabashira dismissed class earlier than usual.

“Having sensei give us a compliment like that feels out of this world, doesn’t it?”

Ike and Yamauchi began laughing cheerfully.

“But don’t get too cocky. Your last exam is only a week away, and by no means will it be easy.”

Chabashira spoke up again just before walking out of the classroom, leaving us with this one last reminder.

Part 1

There was only a little time left for us as first-year students.

I used the time between classes to take a quick bathroom break.

On the way back to class, I happened across two familiar upperclassmen in the midst of a deep conversation.

The first was the current student council president, 2nd-year student Nagumo Miyabi. He was accompanied by his predecessor, 3rd-year student, Horikita Manabu.

It was probably by sheer coincidence, but Nagumo spotted me immediately.

The moment he waved at me, it seemed like I had lost the opportunity to pretend I hadn't noticed and head back to class.

"Yo Ayanokōji. Did you manage to pass the end-of-term exam?"

In contrast to Nagumo's direct question, the elder Horikita just calmly looked in my direction.

"Somehow."

He had engaged me with a meaningless conversation.

"How cold. I don't think that's the right attitude to have when the student council president is right in front of you."

"…Is that so?"

I straightened up a little bit. I wasn't sure if it was enough for him, but it should be somewhat less objectionable.

"Well, whatever. You've come by at just the right time. There's something I've been wanting to ask you."

Before he continued, Nagumo let show a delighted expression, as if he was glad that the three of us were alone.

“In order to divert attention away from the slander that had been going around about Ichinose Honami, it seems that someone went and posted a bunch of rumors about various first-year students on the school forums. Now, I wonder, just *who* would do such a thing?”

He was testing me with his words. No, it was entirely possible that he had already seen right through me.

It didn’t matter how much information he had, my attitude wouldn’t change.

“Well, I have no idea. But at the end of the day, they’ve caused me nothing but trouble.”

“Oh yeah, you were a victim too, weren’t you? What happened with that again…?”

“The school’s announcement made it pretty clear that we shouldn’t be talking about that. I don’t think even the student council president is an exception to that.”

Due to the warning, this sort of inquisitive behavior should be avoided.

“It’s as Ayanokōji says, Nagumo. You should refrain from saying anything too carelessly.”

With the elder Horikita backing me up, Nagumo immediately backed down. It didn’t seem like he was particularly interested in touching on the subject.

“So, what have you two celebrities been talking about?”

“Just having a little discussion with Horikita-senpai. Ain’t that right?”

Seeking confirmation, Nagumo looked to the elder Horikita, who responded with a simple nod.

I was slightly concerned about the location they were holding their

conversation. The two of them had gathered in the hallway near the first-year classrooms, so there was a lingering feeling that something was out of place.

“Tomorrow, a step ahead of the other school years, the third-year students will begin a decisive battle that will determine whether Horikita-senpai will successfully graduate from Class A or not. So I wanted to hear about it from him personally. Are you interested too?”

Unlike the rest of the student body, the third-year students still had to take more than one special exam.

The fact that it was starting so soon wasn’t that surprising.

I didn’t know what Nagumo wanted me to say, but I responded to him honestly anyway.

“I’m not particularly interested. Ultimately, I don’t have the time to be worrying about my upperclassmen.”

Toward my complete lack of interest, Nagumo let show a somewhat dissatisfied expression.

“How cold. You’re acting like that just because you’re Horikita-senpai’s favorite, aren’t you?”

I couldn’t remember ever being particularly favored by him.

In fact, over the past year, I could probably count the number of times I had gotten involved with him on one hand.

“Don’t delude yourself, Ayanokōji. All that preferential treatment doesn’t make you special. You just got lucky with the environment you were placed in. That’s right… It’s all thanks to that *watchful,* anxious classmate of yours right over there.”

Confused, I looked over my shoulder and saw the figure of Horikita, watching us from a distance.

It was too much of a coincidence for this selection of people to have gathered here by chance alone.

“Are you the one who called her here, Nagumo?”

“It’s only natural for me to reach out to the younger sister of my senpai. I’ll be leading the younger generations as the student council president next year, after all.”

Somehow, Nagumo seemed to have orchestrated everything in order to get both of the siblings to show up here.

I seemed to be the only person who was present by mere coincidence.

“Come here.”

Nagumo bluntly called out to the younger Horikita.

“…The one who sent me this email… Was it you, president Nagumo?”

“Well, not exactly, but close enough. You’re Horikita-senpai’s little sister, right?”

“Yes… my name is Horikita Suzune.”

Due to her older brothers presence, Horikita was reserved with her response.

“I didn’t expect my predecessor’s little sister to get placed in Class D after enrollment. I was surprised.”

“What’s your goal here Nagumo?”

Without so much as a glance at his sister, the elder Horikita pressed him for an answer.

After all, Nagumo probably had a reason for why he called them here in the first place.

However, Nagumo simply shook his head, as if to claim he had no ulterior motives.

“I just wanted to meet with you and your little sister.”

His objective here was probably to evaluate her.

Coming to the same conclusion, the elder Horikita took the initiative.

“I’ll say this now just so we’re clear, but you had better not be thinking that you can use my sister to force a concession from me.”

“Concession? Certainly not! Do you really think that I’d ever make a move on her? Such a cute underclassman and moreover my senpai’s precious little sister?”

“For the sake of getting what you want, I think you’d do anything.”

Nagumo didn’t affirm the elder Horikita’s cold words, but he didn’t deny them either.

“Even so, you don’t have to be so distant do you? If only you had told me about your sister earlier. If you had, I would’ve been able to invite her to the student council much sooner.”

“What?”

Hearing something unexpected, both siblings were surprised.

“If it’s my senpai’s little sister, I can have her take over as the student council president after I graduate. The fact that she’s the sister of a man who’s done so much for our school makes her more than qualified enough.”

“Don’t use blood relationships as a means to evaluate somebody’s capabilities. My sister has nothing to do with how well I performed as president.”

“…That’s right. I am not fit to be a member of the student council.”

Horikita rejected Nagumo’s invitation to join the student council. She just didn’t have the self-confidence to be a part of it, given how her older brother had also dismissed the idea.

After all, when I had alluded to her about joining the student council in the past, her reaction had been just as negative.

Nagumo seemed to see something in Horikita’s humble attitude.

“This meeting is just for introductions. I’ll invite you again another day.”

Whether or not Horikita actually wanted to join the student council was another matter. It was as if Nagumo was declaring that he would be actively involved with Horikita moving forward. By doing something so disruptive, he was probably searching for her brother’s weak points.

“…Well then, um, I’m-”

Horikita attempted to get out of the conversation. Rather than wanting to get away from Nagumo, Horikita seemed as though she wanted to get away from her brother.

“The third-years aren’t going to be here for very much longer, you know. Don’t you think it’d be nice to be spoiled a little?”

“I’m sorry. If you’ll excuse me.”

Horikita, judging that any further conversation would be uncomfortable for her brother, quickly hurried back to the classroom. Given Horikita’s reactions, anyone would’ve been able to see how bad a relationship the two siblings had with one another.

“It seems the two of you have a *wonderful* relationship, don’t you Horikita-senpai?”

“Are you satisfied, Nagumo?”

No matter what scheme Nagumo was up to, the elder Horikita didn’t seem concerned.

“I would cherish the time I have left with my little sister if I were you.”

Even though Nagumo was partially trying to get a reaction from him, it was true that Horikita had come to this school to follow after her brother, and yet she had only been able to meet with him a couple of times so far.

“Anyways senpai. Please, do your best to instill a feeling of presence

in the student body by graduating as a member of Class A. If you just so happened to demote down to Class B before graduation, even you won't be able to laugh it off, if you know what I mean?"

If that were to happen, he would probably be thought of as a failure. One who betrayed the expectations of the school and the students around him.

He was probably under quite a bit of pressure… No, he isn't the type of man who would be concerned about such a thing.

The elder Horikita sensed that the conversation had reached its conclusion and left without saying another word.

"Good grief. Of course this isn't enough to get him to take me seriously."

It seemed that Nagumo intended to obsess over his predecessor until the bitter end.

"Is it really so important for you to compete with the former president like this?"

During the training camp a while back, in order to deal with the elder Horikita, Nagumo had opted for a shameless strategy that dragged in the rest of the third-years as well.

"Of course. Taking down Horikita-senpai is the only objective I have left at this school."

After all, there are effectively no opportunities for second and third years to face off against each other.

Yet, it seemed that he intended to make it happen regardless of what forcible means he had to come up with.

"Well, what I do will depend on the details of the exam and Horikita-senpai himself."

It seemed that no matter how many enemies he makes, Nagumo intended to make things clear with the elder Horikita before graduation. Despite claiming otherwise, Nagumo would surely be

deeply involved no matter what the details of the exam turned out to be.

After all, there was almost no time left for him to settle things with his senpai.

“Will there be any problems with next week’s special exam on your end, president Nagumo? I wouldn’t expect the second-years to have it easy either.”

“Well, I wonder. Just carry on, hoping for my inevitable failure.”

As the break was about to end, Nagumo wrapped up the conversation and took his leave.

Shortly after I returned to the classroom, my neighbor Horikita looked over at me.

“President Nagumo and my brother… what were they talking about?”

“If you were interested, you should’ve stayed until the end.”

“That’s…”

Well, it was a difficult conversation for her. She becomes docile and meek like a lamb when she’s in front of her brother, after all.

“It’s unusual that you stuck around and listened to their conversation in the first place. You’ve sure become someone who’s attracting attention from all sorts of people, haven’t you? I wonder if it’s thanks to that relay race you had with my brother at the athletics festival?”

Her words were beautifully laced with a sarcastic irony. To be fair, it’s not like I’m able to predict the future.

Everything doesn’t always go the way I expect it to.

“It doesn’t seem like there were many chances for you to get closer to your brother this past year.”

“…So what?”

Horikita's mood got worse as soon as I brought up her circumstances with her older brother.

That being the case, it would've been better if I didn't get unexpectedly dragged into Nagumo's conversation.

Her concern about what had been discussed earlier with Nagumo was written all over her face.

"Don't you want to try and face him at least once before he graduates?"

"You don't understand anything. There's no way that my brother would look after me. Going out of my way to approach him when I know I would be treated cruelly is just plain stupid."

So you enrolled in the same school, satisfied with just watching over him instead?

"If my brother's interested in anyone… it's unpleasant, but he's only interested in you."

I was about to tell her that she was wrong, but I ended up stopping myself.

At the moment, Horikita wouldn't believe me even if I were to go into the details.

More than anything, it would be meaningless if she didn't have the courage to face him herself.

"Really? Well, maybe you're right."

I responded, cutting the conversation short.

While I think Horikita still had complaints, she didn't say anything else.

Chapter 2: “The Class Vote”

Introduction

The next day, Tuesday March 2nd.

Morning homeroom.

Chabashira walked through the door shortly after the bell rang.

It was the usual scene that unfolded every morning.

The class was enveloped in an air of relaxation.

It was announced yesterday that we had all passed the end-of-year exam without any problems. There were still a few days to go before the start of the final special exam for the first-years on March 8th, so it was no surprise that there wasn't a hint of nervousness in the room.

However, Chabashira's expression as she stood behind the podium was more grim than usual.

She projected a tense, stinging aura that spread to the students as well.

"Um, did something happen?"

Hirata, always prioritizing the stability of the class, took the initiative to speak up.

Chabashira didn't answer right away, instead choosing to simply remain silent.

The impression she gave off made it seem like she was reluctant to say anything.

Up until now, no matter how serious things had been, she would beat her explanations into us without mercy. So, it didn't take very long for the class to realize that this situation was abnormal.

"…There's something I have to tell you all."

She spoke heavily.

Her expression was as stern as ever, but the sound of her voice made her seem like she was struggling.

“As I told you yesterday, the final special exam for the first-years will begin on March 8th. After this special exam, you will advance to the second year, as per the general convention of our school.”

Chabashira turned around, picked up a piece of chalk, and reached for the blackboard.

“This year, however, the situation is slightly different from previous years.”

“Different… How?”

Hirata asked in return, having felt a sense of danger.

“Not a single student in your grade dropped out this year, even after the end-of-year exam. Getting this far without a single dropout has never happened before in the history of this school.”

“We’re pretty awesome when you put it like that, aren’t we?”

I thought about how we shouldn’t be getting ahead of ourselves, but Ike cut in to do just that.

If it was the usual Chabashira, she’d have probably warned him not to get too carried away.

“That’s right, and the school thinks so too. Normally, this would be something to celebrate. Even we, as faculty of the school, hope to see as many students graduate as possible. However, it needs to be said that several problems arise when things don’t turn out the way we expect them to.”

The way she spoke was strange. Hirata and Horikita both seemed to feel something out of place with her choice of words as well.

“It’s as if you’re saying you’re bothered by the fact nobody’s dropped out yet.”

“It’s not like that at all. But, sometimes things happen that go beyond my expectations.”

Even though she was saying something she should be happy about, Chabashira’s words were heavy.

In order to dispel that heaviness, Horikita continued to speak.

“Are you implying that there’s something wrong with us?”

The content of what Chabashira had to tell us wouldn’t change, no matter what questions Horikita might ask. She wasn’t the person making the choices here. She was just the employee who had been given the duty of relaying instructions.

“On the basis that there haven’t been any expulsions among the first-years, the school…”

Chabashira paused for a moment.

Then, she squeezed out the words that had been stuck in her throat.

“…has decided that, given the extenuating circumstances, you will be undergoing a supplementary improvised special exam starting today.”

She wrote down today’s date, Tuesday March 2nd, along with the words “Supplementary Special Exam” on the blackboard.

“Eeeh!? What the heck!? Another special exam!? That’s so unfair! The school’s acting like a stubborn little brat just because none of us dropped out!?”

Chabashira simply glossed over Ike’s complaints. Students didn’t have the right to refuse.

No, maybe she was the one who didn’t have that right. Chabashira was looking less composed than usual today. She didn’t seem to be trying to frighten us, so it was highly likely that this really was

something that the school decided on in a hurry.

“It seems a little different from what we’ve done so far…”

Horikita muttered softly, having realized that there was no point fighting against it at the moment.

“Only the students who manage to pass this supplementary special exam will be eligible to take the special exam on March 8th.”

Having given a small explanation, Chabashira paused for a moment.

“I never agreed to this! I can’t believe we have to be the ones to take another exam!”

“Your dissatisfaction is completely justified. After all, the school has gone and implemented a special exam without any prior notice. Although it’s only one more exam than in past years, it will still inevitably be a burden on the students. It’s a truth that I, as well as the other teachers, have been taking seriously.”

A truth other teachers have been taking seriously? In other words, even though the teachers had been taking it seriously, the school itself had not. The way she had phrased it made it possible to arrive at this sort of conclusion.

Piling up extra special exams would certainly be tough on the students at this point.

For instance, if it’s a written exam that tests academic ability, students would have to re-apply themselves to their studies. Even in the case of a physical exam, they would need to work out potential countermeasures.

There would be a lot of pressure on the students, no matter what kind of exam it was.

That said, even if several students were to express their dissatisfaction, the special exam wouldn’t just disappear.

Chabashira resumed her explanation.

“The content of the special exam is extremely simple, and the dropout rate is fairly low at less than three percent per class.”

A dropout rate of less than three percent.

From what I could infer, it certainly seemed low.

But perhaps, this supplementary special exam was different from the exams we’ve had up till now.

There was no reason for her to expressly bring up the dropout rate.

She had never brought up that piece of information in the exams we had taken before.

The students who noticed this harbored even further suspicions.

When I briefly directed my gaze toward the girl in the seat next to me, our eyes met by chance as she had already been looking at me.

“What’s the matter Ayanokōji-kun?”

“No. Nothing.”

“If you keep looking at me without saying anything, it’ll just make me feel a bit creeped out, you know?”

“…Yeah.”

I turned away, deciding to look out the window for a bit.

In such a confined classroom, I could hear everything that was being said, no matter where I was actually looking.

“I wonder what kind of exam it will be? What will it ask of us?”

“You seem to be feeling anxious about that point in particular, but it’s nothing you need to be worried about. This supplementary special exam will have nothing to do with things like academic or physical ability. When the time comes, you’ll just be expected to do something so simple that anyone should be able to do it, like writing your own name down on the test paper. If there’s ultimately only a three

percent chance of dropping out of school, that's definitely low, wouldn't you agree?"

Throughout all of this, she had been trying to avoid touching on the true nature of the problem: the content of the exam.

"…If difficulty is unrelated, then that three percent is pretty scary for us."

"Certainly, it's as you say, Hirata. It's not like I can't understand how you're feeling. However, whether or not you'll be able to lower that percentage will be based on the preparations you make before the official exam comes to pass. As you've probably already imagined, the results of the exam will change depending on your actions."

"Where was this dropout rate derived from? Based on what you've told us, it sounds like we're just drawing lots. Is that the case?"

The chance of someone in this class dropping out of school wasn't laughable.

Although Chabashira had understated the dropout rate, the burden it placed on the students was greater than anticipated.

Hirata, having been the first person to understand it, challenged that point even further.

"Please tell us. What kind of special exam will we be taking?"

"The name of the special exam is *The Class Poll*."

"The Class… Poll…?"

Chabashira wrote out the name of the special exam on the blackboard.

"I'll now explain the rules for this special exam. For the next four days, you'll be evaluated by your fellow classmates. Then on Saturday, you'll select the names of three students you find worthy of praise, and the names of three students you find worthy of criticism and cast your votes for them. That's it."

Does that mean that we would all be evaluating one another? Thinking about it objectively, students like Hirata and Kushida would accumulate a lot of praise, putting them at the top of the charts. In contrast, it seems like students who are thought of as troublemakers or are holding the class back would accumulate a lot of criticism and plummet to the bottom.

We were shown a glimpse of the urgency the school was facing based on the fact that they were using a Saturday to hold a portion of the exam.

However, based on everything Chabashira had said so far, the students in the upper and lower ranks…

“T-that’s it? That’s all the exam is?”

“Correct. That’s it. Didn’t I tell you it was simple?”

“With that being the case, how does the school determine the outcome of the exam?”

“I’ll explain that now.”

Tightening her grip on the chalk, Chabashira proceeded to write on the blackboard once more.

“The essence of this special exam is the number of praise and censure votes you accumulate on Saturday. The top student… that is, the student who accumulates the most praise votes, will be given a special reward. This special reward will not be private points. Instead, you will receive one point from a new system altogether, *Protection Points*.”

It was a type of point we hadn’t heard anything about until now.

Of course, it captured everyone’s attention.

“Protection points grant you the right to override an expulsion. Even if you were to fail a test, as long as you have a protection point, you can use it to cancel out the questions you had gotten wrong. However, these points cannot be transferred between students.”

It was no exaggeration to say that the moment she said this, a wave of newfound surprise spread throughout the classroom.

“You should all be able to understand how amazing these points are. They’re effectively equivalent in value to twenty-million private points. Of course, in the eyes of an excellent student with no reason to fear expulsion, they may not hold as much value.”

That would probably never be the case. There was no such thing as a student who wouldn’t welcome the right to invalidate an expulsion.

The reward was far too extravagant. No, it was beyond extravagant.

These protection points had the potential to be an outrageously dangerous weapon depending on how they were used.

And it was precisely because of this extravagance that the penalty given to the lowest ranked students would be even greater.

“Does this mean that something bad happens to the three lowest ranked students…?”

Hirata asked, uneasy about the answer.

“No. This time, the penalty only applies to the student who receives the most censure votes in each class. Other students will not be penalized, no matter how many censure votes they receive. After all, the theme of this special exam is *selecting who will take the top spot, and then deciding who will take the bottom.*

“What kind of penalty is it?”

“The special exam this time is different from the ones you’ve had so far, with one point in particular being very different. Namely, that this special exam is being conducted to rectify the problem of there not being any dropouts.”

Indeed. The detail the students should really be worried about was the reason why the supplementary special exam was being carried out in the first place.

If this exam was being held because there had yet to be any

dropouts…

“This special exam is exactly as easy as I told you it was. Even if you lack academic ability or physical strength, you won’t be at a disadvantage. But even so, why would the school go out of its way to provide the special reward of protection points? That would be because it’s probably impossible for all of you to advance to the second year without leaving one of your classmates behind.”

Chabashira turned around and looked at each of us, one by one.

“So, the student at the lowest rank… will be expelled from the school.”

If there was a vote, there would be results.

And if there were results, there would have to be a first and last place student.

And then, the person in last place would be expelled.

This outcome would be inevitable.

It would be the same, no matter how superior or inferior the class was.

The only difference would be *who* would face the penalty.

That was the kind of exam we were dealing with.

The school had set up this supplementary exam simply because they were upset that nobody had dropped out yet. After all, if the supplementary exam took place and no students dropped out, it would’ve been meaningless for them to implement all of this in the first place.

Still, the face of Sakayanagi’s father, the chairman of the school, crossed my mind. While he may not have shown me his true nature during my encounter with him, he still didn’t seem to be the type of person who would enforce such an unreasonable exam.

“I-I don’t understand what you mean, sensei. T-the person in last

place… are you seriously saying that they'll be expelled?"

"That's right. They'll have to face the guillotine. But rest assured, the class itself won't be penalized if someone drops out this time. That's just the type of exam this is."

This was clearly different from previous special exams.

Although the possibility of being expelled on an individual basis was higher, there was also a possibility of everyone being able to elude expulsion altogether. But this time, there was a system in place where a sacrifice was inevitable.

This was the *special case* that the school had prepared for us.

It was precisely because of their urge to force expulsions that they needed to offer something like protection points in return.

Even so, the students would still be burdened with a disproportionate amount of risk.

"It seems unreasonable, doesn't it? Well, that's what I think as a teacher. But, nothing can be done about it now that the school has made its decision. You have no choice but to abide by the rules and take the special exam."

"Is that really alright…?"

Dark clouds hung over the class despite the fact that everyone had just overcome the end-of-year exam.

By this weekend, one student from this class was going to disappear.

"As there's only a short amount of time left until the day of the vote, I will continue the explanation of the rules. The total number of praise and censure votes for each student will be made publically available at the end of the exam. In other words, the results for the whole class will be announced. However, information regarding who voted for whom will remain undisclosed, as the vote will be taken anonymously."

With an exam like this, they would definitely have to do it

anonymously.

Votes of praise aside, there would be problems over the censure votes for quite some time if the finer details of the vote were revealed.

“Moving on, one praise vote and one censure vote will invalidate each other. Let’s say, for example, that you received censure votes from ten people, and praise votes from thirty. This would be equivalent to a total of twenty praise votes. Additionally, neither vote may be cast for yourself, and it’s also forbidden to vote for the same person multiple times.”

“What about abstention…? Would we be allowed to abstain from using our censure votes if we wanted to?”

“Of course not. You’ll have to cast all of your votes, regardless of which type of vote it is. Even if you’re home sick on the day of the exam, you’ll still have to cast your vote.”

In other words, it was impossible for any of us to leave our ballot blank or abstain from the vote altogether.

Several students were visibly troubled over this.

This was a very threatening exam for students who felt like they’d amass censure votes.

Students who completely rely on others to overcome these exams would also feel a considerable amount of pressure.

“…No, it’s too soon to give in to despair.”

Hirata spoke words of comfort, trying to calm Ike and the others down.

“Sensei said earlier that it was only *probably impossible* for everyone to avoid expulsion. That means there should be a loophole somewhere.”

When she explained the rules to us during past exams, the hidden meanings behind her explanations always managed to lead us to a way out.

But what about this time?

This '*probably impossible*' meant that there were methods available we hadn't considered yet.

"Although it's not easy, a way to prevent any of us from dropping out of school definitely exists."

"W-what do you mean, Horikita?"

"If the entire class unites and selects three people for the praise votes and three people for the censure votes, all six of them would end up with a total of zero votes. That way, nobody would end up in last place. Isn't that right?"

"T-that's it! As expected of Suzune!"

It was certainly possible if all of our classmates followed directions. However, if even a single person turned traitor, the students who had been betrayed would be pushed down the path of expulsion.

After all, protection points would incentivize students to reach for first place.

While people like Kushida, who hates Horikita, could be problematic, their influence could be accounted for by making some adjustments ahead of time. If Kushida was put in a position where she was expected to cast a censure vote for Horikita, a crisis could be avoided to some extent. That way, it would be possible to determine who had turned traitor after the results of the vote are announced.

In short, because the traitor would be exposed, they wouldn't be able to carelessly betray the class.

"What Horikita brought up just now about controlling the votes is meaningless."

"Why sensei?"

"If nobody is selected for both the first and last place positions, the special exam will be considered a failure. Regardless of your intentions, should the results of the vote be a net total of zero for

every student in the class, another vote will be held. Put simply, the exam will repeat endlessly until you decide on someone to expel."

With this, the escape path the class was frantically searching for was closed off.

"Isn't that rule strange? If we voted honestly and just so happened to end up with a total of zero votes on each side, the results would still be the same, even if we held another vote. If we forcibly distorted the results after that, it wouldn't feel like the students were chosen by a legitimate evaluation."

"Horikita, your reasoning is correct. Should it just so happen to end up with a net total of zero votes for everyone, a revote does indeed seem contradictory. But, think about it realistically. Coincidentally ending up with a net total of zero votes for everyone in an exam where you explicitly choose people for both first and last place is almost *impossible*, right?"

Chabashira's response was also very reasonable.

A net total of zero votes for everyone wouldn't happen unless the vote had been intentionally set up that way.

"…Then, what happens when there's a tie for first or last place?"

In comparison, there was a fair chance of a tie actually happening.

"In either case, there will be a deciding vote. However, even then, the vote might be tied a second time. If this happens, the situation will be evaluated by a special method prepared by the school. I'm unable to elaborate on this method any further at the present time."

Does that mean she'd only tell us if it actually happens?

Though, the chances of getting to that point were quite low.

"There's no need to worry about it. The probability of there being a deciding vote is effectively zero."

Chabashira added, appearing to share my thoughts on the matter.

“Why? It should be more than possible enough.”

“That would be because you’ll also be receiving praise votes from the students in the other classes.”

“From the other classes?”

“You will all be expected to choose one student you find worthy of praise in another class and cast a separate dedicated praise vote for them. Naturally, this will count as a single, normal praise vote. In other words, in the event that a student is heavily disliked within their own class, but substantially popular with students from the other classes, it would be theoretically possible for that student to end with a total of around eighty praise votes, even after the censure votes are accounted for.”

It was unusual for more than 100 praise votes to be floating around.

Given this new information, it was certainly true that the possibility of a deciding vote taking place was now considerably lower.

With this, it seemed that we had found every piece of the puzzle.

Supplementary Exam The Class Poll

Exam Contents:

The exam consists of a class vote, where each student in each class is allotted three praise votes and three censure votes.

Rule 1:

Praise and censure votes invalidate each other. Praise Votes – Censure Votes = Results.

Rule 2:

You can’t cast praise or censure votes for yourself.

Rule 3:

Voting multiple times for the same person, leaving part of the ballot blank, abstaining from the vote altogether, and other acts of this nature are prohibited.

Rule 4:

The exam will be repeated until the first and last place students have been determined. The last place student will be expelled.

Rule 5:

You are required to cast a separate dedicated praise vote on a student in another class.

These were the details of the supplementary exam.

There was no doubt that this test was extremely straightforward and simple.

But at the same time, it was clear that this exam was the cruelest we've had to face so far.

This weekend, someone in each class was going to disappear.

However-

"Sensei. Why did you say it was *probably impossible*? No matter how I look at it, I can't find any loopholes."

"That's right. There aren't any loopholes. However, it's also true that there's room for uncertainty. You've all probably been thinking this already, but everything changes when you use private points."

"You're saying we can use our private points to avoid expulsion?"

"20 million. If you're able to prepare that many points, the school would have no other choice but to revoke your expulsion."

This was the reason why she had said it was '*probably impossible*'.

The fact that there were no restrictions on the transfer of private points meant that negotiations that made use of them would be tolerated. If you can obtain praise votes with money, then obtain them. That's what the school was telling us.

They've judged this to be a form of strength as well.

With the help of the sheer power of your capabilities that you've shown everyone over the past year.

Or with the financial power of the private points you've managed to save up throughout the previous exams.

Or maybe even the power of teamwork you've accumulated through friendship.

We were free to tackle this exam however we wanted to.

"P-please wait. Twenty million points is a little…"

"It's an impractical amount for you guys, even if you gathered all the private points in Class C. Though, if you collected points from the other classes or received charity from the upperclassmen, it's not impossible."

It would certainly be theoretically possible if we went beyond our own class and school year.

However, if one were to ask whether we would actually gather that many points in order to protect one student, it would be difficult to say.

Even for Class A and Class B, there was a high possibility that they wouldn't be able to gather so many private points either. No, even if they did, it was questionable whether or not they would use them to protect a single student. It would be very risky for them to throw away all of the assets they had built up so far.

"This is the only way you'll be able to work around the rules set by the school. I'll say this ahead of time, other attempts to find a way

around the rules of this exam are absolutely impossible. The rest is up for you to judge and decide upon."

Chabashira finished her explanation as homeroom came to an end.

As soon as she left the classroom, the class descended into turmoil.

"What do we do!? What do we do!? This is a seriously terrible exam, isn't it!?"

"You boys are so noisy!"

"What do you mean noisy!? You're probably going to cast your censure votes for us, aren't you!?"

The boys and girls were tossing slander back and forth, as if on guard against one another.

"How unsightly."

One student laughed scornfully, watching over the conflict between the boys and girls.

The particularly unusual existence of the class, Kōenji Rokusuke.

"There's no use panicking, is there?"

"Do you really think *you* are in any position to be calm right now? Do you even understand how much trouble you've caused the class so far?"

Sudō spoke up, questioning Kōenji as he approached.

So far, Kōenji had certainly been causing issues within the class thanks to his whimsical attitude.

"You selfishly abstained from both the uninhabited island exam and the athletics festival!"

Their conversation began to draw eyes from around the class.

At this point, the weak minded students were looking for the person who would become the sacrifice, all so they could avoid being

expelled from school.

“It is you who doesn’t understand, Red Hair-kun.”

Kōenji crossed his legs and stretched them out over his desk.

“It seems that you’re under the impression that everything you’ve cultivated over the past year is the key to conquering this special

exam."

"That's exactly how it is!"

"Wrong. This special exam has its sights undoubtedly set upon the next two years."

Kōenji flatly rejected Sudō's opinion, or rather, the opinion of the entire class.

"Huh? What are you saying…?"

Completely lost, Sudō probably thought of this as Kōenji's usual nonsensical behavior.

"Would you listen? This exam is literally a special case. Isn't it customary for a class to receive a large penalty when somebody gets expelled? This time, however, that's not the case at all. In other words, this is an extremely suitable opportunity for us to rid ourselves of an *unnecessary student*."

"So, I'm saying that *you're* the unnecessary student; a total burden to the class!"

"Oh no, not at all."

"Wha? …How can you say that!?"

"If you want to know, it's because *I* am amazing."

Kōenji spoke with overwhelming boldness, as if declaring that this was the final say on the matter.

Sudō faltered in the face of his complete lack of hesitation.

"When it comes to the written exams, I'm always at the top of the class, no, of the entire school year. In fact, I placed second only by a slim margin on the end-of-year exam. Of course, had I put in any serious amount of effort, I would've easily taken first. Furthermore, in terms of physical ability, I even surpass you as well. You yourself should know this fact very well, don't you?"

Kōenji flaunted the height of his potential.

“S-so what! That’s all meaningless if you don’t take things seriously!”

“Sure. That’s why from now on, I’ll turn over a new leaf. With this exam as the turning point, I’ll become a useful student who contributes to all sorts of exams moving forward. This would be a great advantage for the class, no?”

“Wh-who would ever believe something like that!? I’m way more useful than you are!”

Sudō’s clamoring was also reasonable.

Nobody in the classroom, including myself, had any reason to believe in Kōenji’s words.

In fact, I didn’t think this man would take things seriously after this exam at all.

Rather, there was no real reason for him to actually change in the first place.

It was clear that, as long as he manages to get through this exam, he would just go back to living a self-indulgent life.

“Well then, allow me to reverse the question. This talk of you being more useful than I, is that something that everyone here can believe?”

Kōenji ignored Sudō, and instead began to address his classmates.

“No, not just Red Hair-kun. When it comes to students who haven’t helped at all yet, there’s no guarantee that they’ll suddenly become helpful in the future, is there? Anyone can list off empty promises, like I just have, but what really matters in the end is hidden strength. Without strength backing them up, empty promises lack persuasiveness altogether.”

The idea that students *without* ability had to strive to turn over a new leaf.

The idea that students *with* ability should strive to turn over a new leaf.

Kōenji was saying that these two ideas were similar, but not the same.

The whole concept of amassing censure votes and ending up as the lowest rank in the class, Kōenji wasn't questioning anything like that at all. On the contrary, he seemed to be welcoming the supplementary exam itself.

However, this didn't mean that Kōenji wasn't facing any risk at all.

Depending on the actions that the class took moving forward, he was at risk of gathering a substantial number of censure votes.

For better or worse, he had said too much.

Although, if I had to be honest, I agreed with Kōenji's idea.

If we were to think about the class as a whole, it was necessary to make a clear decision.

An opportunity had come for us to carefully select an unnecessary student and get rid of them for the sake of the class as a whole, instead of simply choosing based on our personal preferences.

In the case of the previous special exams, there were probably many cases where a student who had great strengths would've been expelled because of a couple of weaknesses. Put simply, this was the case with Sudō, who was arguing with Kōenji. In contrast to the physical abilities he had been blessed with, his academic abilities were in the running for the worst in the class. In fact, his academic abilities almost held him back so much that, at one point, he was on the verge of dropping out of school. However, with the help of Horikita, Sudō gradually began to make up for his shortcomings, and as a result, started to show his value as a member of the class.

Like Sudō, most people have both strengths and weaknesses.

On the other hand, there's no shortage of people who not only lack strengths, but are littered with weaknesses and stand out in a bad

way because of them. Everyone has the potential to grow as a human being, but everyone blossoms at different times, and some are simply limited by their capacity for growth. That was exactly why we had to take advantage of this exam.

Unfortunately, it seems that Kōenji was the only person in the class who was aware of this.

“Stop nagging me Kōenji. I don’t think we need someone like you, and that’s not gonna change.”

“No matter how incompetent your close friends are?”

“Incompetent… you’re calling my buddies incompetent? You’re full of shit!”

Sudō slammed his fist down on Kōenji’s desk and glared at him fiercely.

“Precisely. In any event, is that all? If this is your decision, do feel free to do as you please, but by then… as far as I can tell, this class will simply remain pathetic and inferior.”

Kōenji calmly combed back his hair, without showing a hint of interest.

His repeated provocations had set Sudō aflame.

“You half-heartedly-”

“Both of you relax. We should talk this out calmly, right?”

Hirata forced his way in between the two of them.

How many times had Hirata gone in and mediated like this?

It was a scene that I had already gotten used to seeing, but Sudō was just getting more and more heated and showed no signs of cooling down.

“What do you mean relax, Hirata? Course you’re gonna be fine. After all, there’s no way you’d ever end up in last place.”

“Hey-”

Ike’s words poked Hirata in a sore spot.

It was true that Hirata had greatly contributed to the class over the past year. Generally speaking, it was no exaggeration to say that he was one of the safest students in this exam. In this exam where someone would inevitably be expelled, the words of a student who was effectively safe from danger wouldn’t be able to resonate with others.

“I… It’s not clear what’s going to happen to me.”

Even though he denied it, his words still weren’t able to get through to Sudō.

“You hear that, Kanji? Hirata just said he doesn’t know what’ll happen to him.”

“No no, Hirata-sama is definitely safe.”

Yamauchi and Ike exchanged bitter smiles that were filled with more astonishment than irritation.

This reaction was understandable.

Nobody here had ever considered Hirata to be a potential candidate for expulsion.

Even if he gathered a few censure votes, he was sure to get more than enough praise votes to cancel those out.

“!…”

Hirata attempted to say something several times, but the words wouldn’t come out.

The special exam had still only just been announced.

Given the restless state of the classroom, they wouldn’t be able to calmly accept anything Hirata had to say.

“Let’s keep talking Kōenji.”

“I have nothing more to say to you.”

“There’s more than enough to talk about.”

Sudō pressed the matter further. At this point, the only one who’d be able to stop him would be…

“That’s enough Sudō-kun.”

Horikita spoke up, the final word for the discussion.

“Don’t get so carried away just because your grades have improved a little bit.”

“No, this time, it’s not like that…”

“Zip it.”

“…Got it.”

She had complete control over Sudō with just a handful of words.

Horikita instructed Sudō to return to his seat and keep his distance from Kōenji.

“Horikita-san, you’ve been a great help.”

“It’s no big deal compared to the trouble caused by this exam.”

Saying that, Horikita also distanced herself from Kōenji and returned to her seat.

I spoke up as she approached.

“Thank you for your hard work.”

“That took a lot of extra effort.”

She let out a sigh and sat down.

“But… things have really become troublesome. Despite all the

instability and collusion, the class had always been able to cooperate. And yet, they come along and force us to kick someone out… it's far too cruel."

Horikita lamented, unable to do anything about the chaos that enveloped the room.

"Cruel, huh."

Of course, I understood that she was just looking to complain.

"You don't think so?"

"There was never any guarantee from the start, ever since we first enrolled."

"…Yeah. It was really just an afterthought. But even so, I still think that this exam is outrageous."

"Well, it seems like revenge for the fact that nobody's been expelled yet."

It would be reasonable to feel dissatisfied like Horikita.

However, I couldn't afford to be a mere bystander during this particular exam.

The whole class had to bear the risk of expulsion. No, as a student toward the bottom of the social hierarchy, I'm afraid that I would be in even more danger of accruing censure votes if I didn't get involved in this exam.

To avoid that, it would probably be best to lay out the groundwork ahead of time.

"I honestly can't come to terms with this exam, but…"

Despite Horikita's grumbling, I could sense something like fierce determination in her expression.

Afterward, the restless atmosphere persisted throughout the classroom until the end of the morning classes.

Part 1

During lunch break, the Ayanokōji Group decided to take advantage of the free time to hold a discussion at the cafe.

“Ah jeez, this totally sucks doesn’t it? Forcing someone to drop out is like, what’s the school even thinking?”

Haruka let out an exasperated sigh as she poked a straw into her drink.

Keisei was the first to respond.

“I agree. The most unforgivable thing for me is the fact that my classmates have to fight against one another. It’s a complete 180 from how the exams we’ve had so far have required cooperation. It’s absolutely baffling.”

“I get you. Up until now, no matter what kind of exam it’s been, we’ve only had to go against the other classes.”

Akito spoke up in agreement as well.

“Just because there hasn’t been a single expulsion… it’s like the school’s deliberately trying to get at us, isn’t it?”

Throughout the morning, everyone had been restlessly passing the time in one way or another, unable to calm down.

It was only natural, given that many students were dissatisfied with the unreasonable additional exam the school had announced. It was possible that the other cliques of students were talking about it as well.

“I wonder if there’s really no secret trick to the exam. Yukimuu, you’re a smart cookie. Surely you’ve thought of something?”

“No… I don’t think so? Horikita’s initial proposal of fixing the vote by spreading the votes out equally is the only strategy I can think of.

But, based on what Chabashira-sensei told us, it's probably impossible. Although the additional exam is a little selfish, we can't just ignore the rules set by the school."

It was no surprise that Keisei couldn't come up with a solution.

No matter how you look at it, the way out of this exam had been sealed off.

"I also figured the school didn't want there to be any dropouts. At least, that's what I used to think, but now it looks like that isn't the case."

"…You're saying that the school really wants to see people get expelled…"

Having still held onto a glimmer of hope, Haruka's expression turned grim.

"That's why it'd be better not to be optimistic this time. There'll probably be a harsh outcome waiting for us."

A harsh outcome. In other words, an expulsion from our class.

It was the inevitable future that was waiting for us.

"…It's possible that one of us will disappear this weekend."

Not having said a word for quite some time, Airi shook her head anxiously.

Her demeanor made it seem like she was unwilling to imagine such a future.

"Keisei. Instead of silently waiting for the exam, there must be something we can do, right?"

Akito asked, hoping to hear something to dispel his anxiety.

As if on cue, Keisei nodded once and looked at each of us in quick succession.

“As Akito says, we have to be doing *something* to avoid expulsion. So, I have a suggestion. Why don’t we come together and vote for each other?”

“By vote for each other, you mean using our praise votes on each other?”

“Yeah, I don’t think any of us will rack up enough praise votes to take first place. But just in case, it would be better for us to work together so all of us can avoid coming in last.”

With the five of us working together, we’d each be able to get three praise votes.

The important point is that it’d also be negating three censure votes.

“B-but is that okay? Aren’t we expected to vote for the student who contributed the most to the class…? Sensei also told us it would be a waste of time to try and control the votes like this…”

The ever-honest Airi spoke somewhat uneasily.

“To some extent, voting in groups like this is unavoidable. Chabashira-sensei and the other students should all be aware of this already. Furthermore, even if we don’t do it, there’s bound to be several other groups that will. After all, it’s possible to use the same strategy to concentrate censure votes on one person. In fact, the five of us alone have the capability of casting five censure votes for a single person.”

“Five votes… that’s… a heavy number for this exam. If you made a big enough group, it wouldn’t be that difficult to put in ten or twenty, would it?”

“That’s exactly right. In short, those with a better standing in class will have an easier time with the exam.”

Indeed, this was one of the key points of the exam.

For any given student, the higher their social status within their class, the more favorable their voting trend will be. Highly influential students could also enjoy the advantage of being able to put together

a group and attack specific students.

“I also agree with using our group to cover for each other. It’s not like I want any of us to go missing.”

I seconded that opinion.

“M-me too.”

Airi followed in agreement.

“It’s decided then.”

Keisei nodded in response to the group’s unanimous agreement.

“Wait, hold up. There’s something I’d like to ask about first.”

Even though Akito had already agreed with Keisei’s strategy, there still seemed to be something weighing on his mind.

“Won’t there be people trying to create a bigger group than ours?”

“Of course that might happen. Rather, there’s a good chance it will.”

Naturally, Keisei already knew as much and agreed with him.

If Keisei were to suggest that we should go and form a large group, I would have no other choice but to stop him. It wouldn’t be the best policy for this exam.

“Then, shouldn’t we be taking measures to reach out to others as soon as possible?”

“No… Generally speaking, we have to try not to cause any trouble until the end of the exam. We just have to make sure that we absolutely never start anything with anyone in the class, no matter who it is. So let’s give up on the idea of making a large group.”

“So you’re saying… In order to avoid being targeted by others, we should try not to stand out.”

If you were to draw unnecessary attention to yourself, you’d be likely to end up as an easy target like Sudō and Kōenji.

“Besides, we’re obviously not a suitable group for that kind of strategy.”

“Well, I guess so.”

Keisei concluded that we should avoid creating a large group.

I was thankful that the entire group, Haruka included, had reached a consensus.

It was nice to see that there was no longer any possibility of one of them getting caught up in my *strategy* and being put at a disadvantage.

“However, if you’re personally invited into another group, I think it’d be alright for you to accept the invitation. It’d be a valuable way for you to avoid being targeted by censure votes.”

Even though we had agreed to keep our praise votes within the Ayanokōji Group, that was still only three votes per person.

It would be all the more profitable for us if we could stay on good terms with the other groups and avoid censure votes.

“But won’t that be difficult? One of the original reasons we grouped together is because we aren’t able to do that sort of thing.”

Haruka seemed to be saying that we had created our group precisely because we weren’t able to fit in with any of the other groups.

Well, I suppose Keisei already understood this when he made the suggestion in the first place.

Supposing any of us did receive an invitation, it’d be best to follow Keisei’s advice.

While this was the correct decision, it was also true that it came with a noteworthy amount of risk.

If you were to foolishly join up with too many different groups and get taken as someone who’s trying to be friends with everybody, you may end up suffering instead.

You wouldn't be able to find a group that would be willing to take you in so easily.

"With just three votes… there's… no saying for sure that we'll all be safe, is there? I… I'm no help at all to the class, so… maybe everyone will use their censure votes on me…"

The idea of becoming the target herself made Airi even more uneasy.

For this exam, if the entire class were to focus their censure votes on one person, there would be effectively no way for them to defend against it. Hirata or Kushida may be able to get enough praise votes to invalidate most of the censure votes, but…

No, even that would be unlikely. The main focus of the exam was how many groups you can create to secure your votes. It would be best to assume that the number of students receiving votes based on proper evaluations would be extremely limited.

"Don't worry too much, Airi. You'll worry yourself into the ground if you do."

"Y-yeah…"

Airi's face clouded over. Despite the encouragement, she couldn't help the uneasiness she was feeling.

There were certainly numerous drawbacks to having a timid personality like hers in an exam like this one.

"This is totally the worst… like, we have to be hostile to our own classmates and constantly be on our guard from being attacked by them at the same time."

"I agree, but since it's an exam, we don't have any other choice."

"Are you really gonna accept it that easily Kiyopon?"

"Even if we don't want to, I don't think we have any other choice."

After saying 'how mature' under her breath, Haruka nodded in agreement, seemingly impressed with my response.

“Oh, by the way, I just noticed a little bit ago, but look at *that*.”

Haruka pointed behind Keisei and me.

As I looked over my shoulder, I saw the figure of a boy from Class D.

He was clearly at odds with his surroundings, and he stood out because of it. This was probably why Haruka had noticed him.

“There’s something a bit off with this whole situation, and there’s something unusual going on with Ryūen-kun as well.”

“Hah. He’s nothing but a self-imposed king who put on airs before being exposed and stripped of everything he had.”

Keisei’s tone was so cold, it made me wonder if it was because he had a particular hatred for people like Ryūen.

Though, it was a natural consequence, considering the strategies Ryūen had used and the poor attitude he’s had when interacting with the other classes.

Of course, there was no way Ryūen would be feeling remorseful about his current situation, nor would he be feeling worried.

“But, this exam is going to be pretty demanding for Ryūen-kun, right? Or is that not the case?”

Keisei nodded in response to Haruka’s doubt-filled questions.

“I think *demanding* is an understatement. Wouldn’t it be more accurate to call it hopeless? He had been doing whatever he wanted for so long that there’s no way he’ll be able to avoid amassing censure votes.”

Akito nodded as well, sharing Keisei’s opinion. Haruka spoke up, adding onto Keisei’s point.

“It’s kinda pitiful, isn’t it? The fact that he might be forced out of the very class that he used to control.”

“But, isn’t he too calm for that? For him to be reading a book out in

the open, all alone… I'd probably cry if I was in his shoes."

Airi spoke up, looking at Haruka questioningly.

"Really? It's because he's given up. Considering the type of exam this is, there's no reason for friendless people who are hated by those around them to struggle. He probably plans to face the exam as a man until the bitter end, don'tcha think?"

This conclusion didn't seem wrong.

However, the fact of the matter was that, if Ryūen didn't do anything, there was a high possibility he'd be expelled from the school.

"Miyatchi, just go and ask him how he's feeling right now."

"I can't ask him that…"

Even though he seemed calm and composed, it didn't change the fact that his fangs were sharp.

There was no way of knowing what he'd do if you went and carelessly poked fun at him.

"Stop staring at him so much."

"Okay～"

Haruka responded to Akito's warning, lightheartedly surrendering her hands in the air.

"Getting back on topic, what do you think about what Kōenji said in class?"

Akito asked Keisei about what had happened earlier this morning.

Keisei had probably already been thinking about it, as he responded almost immediately.

"You mean what he said about hidden strength? Well, I think he has a point, but I still think Kōenji is an unnecessary student. That guy is always causing problems for the class. To be honest, it's kinda scary."

If you were to look at it from Keisei's perspective, who's averse to taking risks, Kōenji was certainly an unpredictable existence.

"Besides… this may sound a bit heartless, but if we got rid of Kōenji, there wouldn't be very severe consequences. Ultimately, he's one person it would be really easy for me to use a censure vote on. What do you guys think?"

"Well, that may be true. If we have to choose someone, it would be ideal if it was someone we could vote for without hesitation."

"Uh… Even though Kōenji-kun is a strange person, he always gets amazing test scores, doesn't he? As far as tests go, I think he's contributing much more to the class than I am…"

In the midst of her own anxiety, Airi spoke in defense of Kōenji.

"I always think Keisei-kun and Kōenji-kun are amazing every time the test results come out…"

"That's no good Airi. If you can't make a resolute decision now, you'll only suffer later on, you know?"

"I know but…"

Even so, it seemed that Airi was strongly opposed to having to vote for someone. Haruka spoke up as Airi trailed off.

"Well, for the time being, *I* think that Kōenji-kun is a solid vote."

"I have no objections to that."

Haruka looked to Keisei, asking him for his opinion.

"For now, sure. Since we'll have to choose three people anyway, we can make adjustments later on if the situation calls for it."

Kōenji had become one of the candidates for the Ayanokōji Group's censure votes.

It was only appropriate for there to be various opinions on whether Kōenji was necessary or not.

Even from my point of view, the man known as Kōenji certainly came with a large amount of risk.

After all, there could be heavy consequences because of his whimsical nature.

Still, he certainly possesses talent far greater than that. If he were to tackle exams and problems head-on, he'd be able to accomplish pretty much anything. Even if I haven't seen just how capable he is yet, he was certainly capable enough to make me think this way.

"I don't hate him or anything… but it's hard to say whether Kōenji's good for the class or not."

This also seemed to be the reason why Akito had accepted the decision to vote for him.

His presence is pronounced above the rest, or rather, his existence itself seems hard to measure, even after taking rumors into consideration.

"In addition there's… Ike-kun, Yamauchi-kun, and Sudō-kun, right? They all seem like solid choices for censure votes as well, don't they?"

"Mhm. Those four, Kōenji included, all seem like the likely candidates for expulsion right now. However, I can't imagine that they'll all just sit back and wait for the day of the vote. They all probably form large groups to collect praise votes and try their best to take measures to avoid getting more censure votes."

"We're by no means safe either."

That was exactly right. The exam had already begun. A battle to make allies and establish a common enemy.

"Given the conversation we've been having, It's hard for me to imagine everyone in the class having been comrades until just this morning."

Akito let out a frustrated sigh as he imagined the things to come.

As if something had occurred to her, Haruka once again looked at Ryūen.

“There are still several candidates to choose from. Maybe it’d be better if everyone had the chance to avoid expulsion, don’t you think?”

It was precisely because she understood the current state of Class C that Haruka was aware of the difficulties Ryūen faced in Class D.

No matter who you were, you wouldn’t stand a chance if you were targeted by everyone.

“Miyatchi, Yukimuu. Hypothetically speaking, what would you two do if you were in Ryūen-kun’s shoes?”

“I wouldn’t do anything. It’d be pointless to struggle if the entire class was against me. I’d probably give up.”

Akito would’ve quickly thrown in the towel.

Keisei pondered over her question seriously for a while before finally shaking his head.

“It’s impossible.”

“Impossible? What if you, like, threatened the entire class or something like that?”

“That would only be counterproductive.”

There were probably several students who expected Ryuuen to do just that.

Those who felt threatened would be able to cast their censure votes for Ryūen without reservation.

“Then what about gathering praise votes by prostrating yourself to the other classes?”

“If Ryūen asked you, would you vote for him?”

“Eh~? I don’t think so…”

“That’s how it is.”

Keisei spoke in agreement, having Haruka prove his point for him.

“Most people would come to the same conclusion you just did. After all, everyone already knows Ryūen’s usual behavior. There shouldn’t be that many weirdos out there who’d consider helping that guy.”

“Then, how about a little bit of bribery or buying the votes from your classmates?”

“Even if we assumed that Ryūen has a large amount of points saved up, it doesn’t seem like he’d be able to buy enough votes. Oddly enough, not only has he made too many enemies, but he’s also given off the impression of being a troublesome opponent. I doubt that any of his classmates would be willing to sell him a praise vote for a little bit of money.”

“Then, doesn’t he still totally have a chance with the other classes?”

“No, not really. From the perspective of outsiders like us, wouldn’t it be easier to compete against Class D with Ryūen out of the picture?”

“Aah… Maybe you’re right. It was scary when we didn’t know what he was going to do next.”

This was exactly why Ryūen was in trouble. If it was the case that he was merely a burden holding Class D back, he’d be able to collect praise votes from the other classes and prevent his expulsion. However, because Ryūen is recognized as a troublesome existence by other classes as well, many of them would want to see him leave the school. There were very few advantages for any of the classes to deliberately allow such a potential threat to stick around.

There may be some Class D students thinking about the distant future, or blindly believing that Ryūen would become the savior of the class, but there’s no doubt that these students would be in the minority.

Even if Ryūen formed contracts with several other students promising

to cast praise votes for each other, it would be difficult to prove whether or not they've actually carried out their contractual obligations. Because the vote will be carried out anonymously, as long as you receive a single praise vote, anyone would be able to lie and claim that they voted for you. Even if Ryūen wanted to start a dispute over improper conduct, it'd be too late. He would've already been expelled.

Furthermore, before any of this, there was still the issue of finding someone willing to form a contract with Ryūen in the first place.

"So it's a complete checkmate…"

"He's doing all he can to put up a calm front. After all, desperately struggling just because you don't want to be expelled would be unsightly."

"Yeah… That'd be pretty shameful for someone who used to act like he owned the place, wouldn't it?"

It was a pity, but Ryūen's expulsion was pretty much set in stone.

Of course, if he actually had a reason to struggle, the situation would be a bit different, but…

We wouldn't find the answers, no matter how much we discussed it here.

What he thought about all this was something known by him alone.

"Then, how about we try to find out?"

Someone spoke up from over my shoulder, the sound of their voice ringing out close to my ear. It was Horikita.

She had a plastic bag in hand with a sandwich lunch peeking out of it.

"What do you mean by 'try to find out'?"

Akito questioned her, feeling something out of place with her choice of words.

No, it was more like he had felt something unsettling.

“What he thinks about all of this, what he plans on doing next. We have no choice but to ask him to find out.”

“Stop it. Just let sleeping dogs lie.”

Nobody wanted to volunteer to approach Ryūen.

“That’s fine then.”

“There’s no reason for any of us, you included, to get involved with Ryūen right now. He has nothing to do with this exam.”

“That is true, isn’t it? He’s certainly of no concern to the class, but he may prove useful to me.”

Horikita said this before pausing for a moment.

Shortly after seeing that I had no intention of joining her, she left to see him on her own.

“May prove useful to me? What even…?”

Keisei and Akito didn’t understand, as they both tilted their heads to the side in confusion.

“Hey, isn’t this a bit problematic? Isn’t Horikita-san in danger?”

“I think so too… Kiyotaka-kun?”

Haruka and Airi spoke up as they passed the situation off onto me.

“…I suppose. I’ll go check it out for a bit.”

I didn’t think anything would happen, but it’d probably be better if she had someone with her, just in case.

For better or worse, Horikita wasn’t one to mince her words.

I stopped Akito from coming along and left to catch up with her.

“What do you plan on talking about with Ryūen?”

“I just thought he may be able to provide me with some useful information.”

Useful information? I couldn’t understand what she expected to find out from him.

But seeing that she was taking action, she probably had a reason behind it.

“Did Sakura-san and the others ask you to watch over me?”

“Something like that.”

“Oh really.”

Throughout our short exchanges, Horikita’s pace didn’t change.

Before long, we had reached where Ryūen was seated.

He should’ve already noticed our presence, but his gaze was fixed on the book he held in his hand. Based on the page he was reading, it appeared to be some sort of literary novel.

“You’re awfully composed, Ryūen-kun.”

“I was wondering who it was, but it was just Suzune and her mindless little follower.”

He suddenly closed the book, the seal on the cover showing that it had been borrowed from the library.

It went without saying, but the ‘mindless little follower’ he spoke of was, of course, referring to me. He only looked at me for an instant before averting his gaze and facing Horikita.

“And what sort of business do you have with me?”

I was curious why Horikita was even taking the risk of trying to reach out to Ryūen in the first place.

“I’ll be blunt. This new special exam. What are you going to do?”

“It’s not like I have a lot of choices. I’m not going to do anything.”

“In other words… you’re saying you’ve obediently resigned yourself to drop out of school?”

If things stayed as they were, Ryūen’s expulsion would be inevitable.

“I make for a good target for the whole lot. In an exam like this one where someone has to be expelled, nobody wants to attract the resentment of the poor sap who gets kicked out, but in my case, that just ain’t how it works.”

Having discerned that the conversation wasn’t worth his time, Ryūen re-opened his book and continued reading.

“The censure votes will be cast for you. While many students may feel guilty about it, the mental burden on everyone would still be far less than it would be if they voted for somebody else.”

Ryūen appeared to be seriously considering the idea of leaving the school.

“If you really intend on leaving the school, I won’t say a word. No, not just me. There are probably many people in Class B and Class A who want you to disappear as well. For better or worse, you went too far. Nobody’s willing to lend you a hand.”

She outlined the reality of the situation.

In some cases, words like these would be a powerful blow, even to somebody who already understood the situation.

But, they wouldn't mean anything to Ryūen.

He had already understood everything on his own and accepted all of it from the bottom of his heart.

"That's probably right. Class D doesn't stand a chance after I'm gone. As students from the other classes, it would be the best and most appropriate judgment for you to crush me here."

Rather than spinning it in a negative way, he spun it in a positive one instead.

"That's an awfully high evaluation of yourself. How typical of you. But even with all that confidence, you've fallen to Class D because of your lack of capability as a leader, haven't you?"

"Kuku. Certainly."

Class D was able to move forward under Ryūen's dictatorship.

Now that it had collapsed and they've tumbled down to the bottom, they were losing the opportunity to rise back up again.

However, Ryūen's plan never had anything to do with the class rankings from the very start. Whether you're Class A or Class D, as long as you had private points, you'd be able to turn defeat into victory. This was why, even in the face of criticism over being the lowest rank, he had no need for agitation.

Class A may be the superior class, but superiority in and of itself didn't have value.

Ryūen's strategy was focused on the future. It was an interesting way to fight, but there were many shortcomings. He used force to hold his position, and didn't seek understanding from his classmates. He looked too far ahead and couldn't see what was happening around him. These were the reasons that played a part in his defeat and led him to his current situation.

"It doesn't seem like we'll ever be able to understand each other."

"So it seems. Satisfied?"

Even though I'd been listening to Horikita's conversation this whole time, I still didn't understand what she wanted to learn from him…

"Today might be the last time we'll be able to speak to each other, so is it alright if I ask you a single question?"

She seemed to be getting to the heart of the matter.

Was this the question that would lead Horikita to the information she was looking for?

"You're in a more desperate situation than anyone else right now. If you put a serious amount of effort into tackling this exam… would you be able to survive and avoid expulsion?"

She looked at him with a sharp gaze, daring him to look her in the eyes and respond.

This was the reason why Horikita was talking to Ryūen, even though she had no reason to be concerned with him.

She wanted to ask Ryūen how he'd be able to overcome the near-certain outcome of being expelled from the school.

"What a stupid question. Of course I could."

Ryūen responded without hesitation. He held the conviction that, as long as he wanted to survive, he would be able to.

The look he had in his eyes didn't have a shred of uncertainty.

"That's what I'd expect from you, even if you're bluffing. I don't feel anything but confidence from you."

"Are you finally satisfied? Or do you want to hear my secret plan for surviving the exam?"

"There's no need. I'm not in the same position you are."

"Of course."

"Thank you. It feels like I may manage to steel my resolve a bit more

thanks to you.”

“Your resolve?”

Horikita nodded, clarifying herself.

“There will definitely be expulsions because of this supplementary exam. It’s an unavoidable fate. So, it’s necessary for us to correctly determine the most suitable person to remove. Do you understand the weight behind what I’m saying?”

“Your struggling may lead you to being ostracised by the rest of your class.”

Ryūen smiled as he responded, not giving her question a clear response either way.

“If that’s how it ends up, then that would just be the full extent of my capabilities.”

“How lame. So it was all just a bluff?”

“!…”

Even though Horikita had been talking to Ryūen calmly, Ryūen had seen through her calm facade.

No, rather than just seeing through it, it was more like he had broken it down himself.

“You’re looking for self-confidence from talking to me, but your resolve doesn’t amount to anything.”

Ryūen’s words gradually stoked a fire within Horikita.

“Choosing who to kick out is the only remotely difficult part of the whole thing.”

“…I can do that. I’ve never shown mercy to anyone who’s held my class back, ever since I enrolled here.”

“No you can’t.”

“You… what could you possibly understand about me?”

“I’ve had plenty of time to keep tabs on you this past year, so I understand you well enough. Putting it in a way even you could understand, I can see the weakness you’re trying to keep hidden.”

Horikita had no chance of winning this verbal showdown.

Her half-baked, vague response of ‘It feels like I may manage to steel my resolve a bit more’.

That moment of hesitation before she said ‘I can do that’.

Ryūen was instantly able to notice these small details that other people wouldn’t normally be able to.

Horikita was showing him her weakness without even knowing it.

Their conversation was completely in Ryūen’s control.

“Your class has already made you complacent. There’s no way you could be ruthless enough to make a choice at this point. You’d have had to avoid making any lingering attachments to your class from the start like me, or treated your classmates like chess pieces like Sakayanagi.”

Your class would feel very different after making a lot of close connections with your classmates.

When Horikita first enrolled here, she always acted without hesitation. She was fully willing to abandon Sudō after he failed his exam. But if you were to ask whether or not she’d be able to abandon him now, it would probably be impossible for her. Her relationship with her classmates had been constantly changing.

“You sound like you have it all figured out, but you don’t really have a way to save yourself, do you?”

“And why would you think that?”

“Did you truly lose to a classmate, or was it done by someone outside of your own class…?”

Horikita glanced at me for a split second before immediately looking back at Ryūen.

“Whichever one it is, are you just going to silently accept your loser status and drop out of school?”

Horikita threw these words into his face as a provocation.

However, Ryūen accepted all of it without batting an eye.

“It’s Ishizaki’s reward as the one who defeated me, so I plan on sitting back and accepting it. It’s an opportunity that you, and the rest of Class D, shouldn’t miss out on.”

Ryūen let a smile show as he spoke and once again turned his attention back to his book.

“…Oh really? Then, I’ll just have to keep an eye out and make sure my classmates never, ever waste any of their praise votes on you. Of course, even if I didn’t, there’s no way they’d vote for you anyway.”

Horikita walked away and I followed right after her. Ryūen’s attention was transfixed on his book as we left.

Horikita spoke up as we walked, her voice simultaneously entirely calm and filled with anger.

“That guy is the physical embodiment of a liar. It’s not that he’s not struggling to stay enrolled, he’s just putting on airs. It doesn’t matter though. No matter how much he struggles, he’s doomed to drop out of school.”

“Who knows. He may really have some sort of plan.”

“Impossible. There’s no way for Ryūen-kun to prevent his expulsion, no matter how you look at it. Even if he apologized to his class and started being an actually decent human being for once, it wouldn’t change how many votes he’d get either way.”

“Yeah. There’s no way he’d be able to pull it off with a strategy like that.”

“It would be pointless for him to try and threaten or bribe people too. You guys were saying the same thing earlier as well, right?”

She was right about that. She must’ve been listening in on our conversation.

“Or, perhaps you’ve already thought of something? A way for Ryūen-kun to avoid expulsion?”

“Nope, not at all.”

I had been trying to think of a solution for a while, but given his situation, I still couldn’t think of anything that would reliably save him.

I was still missing an essential piece of the puzzle.

“Then that’s all there is to it.”

Horikita left the cafe in the same frustrated mood she had entered with.

I turned around briefly, glancing over at Ryūen.

I imagined what it would have been like if Ryūen and I had met each other earlier…

“No, it’s a meaningless delusion. At least, for the time being.”

There was no reason to think about a student who was about to disappear anymore.

I stopped thinking about it and decided to return to the Ayanokōji Group.

Part 2

That night, I got a phone call from Kei.

For the most part, it had to do with the special exam.

“Yeah so, this exam. What should I be doing?”

“You’ve started forming a group around you, right?”

“Well, kinda. There are seven girls in my group.”

She listed off the names of the girls other than herself.

They were all girls that Kei usually got along well with.

“After all, everyone’s totally scared of getting expelled. If I’m being real with you… I’m not sure how many people hate me.”

“It wouldn’t be that strange if you got a few censure votes.”

“Uhm. Shouldn’t you be telling me otherwise, even if you have to lie about it?”

Kei angrily snapped back at me from the other end of the phone.

“For now, the best course of action is to act quietly so that you don’t attract too much attention. It’s possible that you could become a candidate for expulsion if you stand out in a bad way.”

“Gotcha. I’ll make sure not to do anything stupid.”

“Good. Also, the fact that you’ve already broken up with Hirata by now may be advantageous for you.”

“Eh?”

“Hirata is very popular with the girls. If you were still together with him… some of them may have planned to use expulsion to forcibly separate the two of you.”

“Eep, that’s spooky. Although totally possible…”

Other students might do something impulsive purely because of the anonymity of the vote.

“…You should be fine right? You don’t stand out because you stick to the shadows, and your grades are average too.”

In the eyes of most of the class, there shouldn’t be anything to criticize or praise me for.

“Keeping a low-profile can have its advantages.”

“But it’s possible for you to get a censure vote from Sudō-kun, isn’t it? Like, in order to get rid of a rival aiming for Horikita-san. Though, well, that’s probably just what he thinks.”

“Maybe.”

Because there was no other choice but to vote for three people, everyone would probably get a couple of censure votes. Though, it wouldn’t be enough to be worth worrying about.

“Out of the whole class, I’d say that the three idiots and Kōuenji-kun are all kinda terrible, right?”

It appeared as though Kei’s group of friends had come to a similar conclusion as the Ayanokōji Group.

“They’re the top choices, but we still don’t know what will happen. That said, Kōuenji probably isn’t in a very good spot at the moment.”

“He’s not the type of person who would make groups and coordinate votes, is he?”

“Yeah.”

Ike, Yamauchi, and Sudō would obviously form a small group to support each other.

Kōuenji, on the other hand, was helpless and alone. He also had a tendency to make enemies thanks to that headstrong attitude of his.

Furthermore, on the very day the exam was announced, he had a tense argument with Sudō in front of the whole class.

“So what are you gonna do? Who do you plan on using your censure votes on?”

“I haven’t really thought about it yet, but I plan on picking people I don’t expect to be useful to the class moving forward.”

“How level-headed of you. But that’s your style, isn’t it?”

Seeing as someone inevitably had to leave the school, this was the only way for me to make my decision.

“Ah? There’s no way, but… you’re not talking about people like me, right?”

“You’re important to the class. There’s no way I’d do that.”

“R-really. W-well of course.”

Her surprised reaction sounded just a little embarrassed.

“If the class makes a decision on the students to get rid of, that is, if you notice that they’ve made a decision about who exactly they’ll be using their censure votes on, let me know. It’s difficult for me to get that kind of information myself.”

“Okay～”

I ended the call with Kei.

Even though I had told her I would pick people I didn’t expect to be useful moving forward, that was only my personal opinion on the matter.

Since I wasn’t actively involved in the class, I didn’t have any intention of getting deeply involved with manipulating the votes.

Accordingly, I intended to wholeheartedly accept whatever outcome the class came to, no matter which groups went at each other. Of course, if I were to come under fire, that would be a different story

altogether.

Anyway, just as Kei had mentioned earlier, the chance of Ike, Yamauchi, or Sudō being expelled isn't low. Kōenji as well. Furthermore, on the girls' side of things, the ones with poor grades like Inogashira, Satō, and Airi probably aren't safe either. Moving forward, however, groups would gradually begin to take shape. Large numbers of votes would start to move around for reasons completely unrelated to academic ability. Isolated people like Kōenji and timid people like Airi who don't have many friends would also become easy targets.

"I wonder what'll happen next."

I just had to collect information to prepare for any unexpected developments and keep an eye on the trend of the vote.

Chapter 3: The Difficulty of Salvation

Introduction

I checked my phone when I woke up the next morning.

And, sure enough, the Ayanokōji Group's group chat had progressed greatly while I was asleep.

It hadn't even been a full day since Chabashira had announced the supplementary exam, so it was understandably at the center of their discussion.

"They're really being driven by their anxiety, aren't they?"

Airi's concern was particularly obvious given the way she had written her messages.

Things would get messy if someone in our group became a target. I wasn't sure just how much I'd be involving myself, and it was also true that it was a difficult situation to make countermeasures for. Even though I intended to make the necessary arrangements for Hirata and Kei, there were no guarantees.

Even if you threatened someone and forced them to make an agreement, there was still a chance they would change their votes at the last minute. There was simply no surefire way to avoid expulsion if you were targeted by a large number of censure votes.

In any case, everyone had to undergo at least a certain amount of risk.

As I scrolled back through the messages, there was an interesting proposal from Keisei. I began reading from there.

Keisei: [How do you guys feel about having one of us go to school early for the next three days to collect information?]

Akito: [Since we're such a small group, that might be a good idea. I'm on board.]

Haruka: [That might be a good move. I am curious about what kind

of stuff other groups will be saying.]

Airi: [I agree too.]

Haruka: [I'll do it tomorrow since I'll be heading out early.]

Everyone had unanimously come to an agreement. They had discussed waiting to hear my thoughts on the matter, but since it usually took a while for me to check my phone, they ultimately decided to move forward with it and see what I thought about it later on.

"I see."

While I didn't believe that information would fall into our laps so easily, it was still better than doing nothing.

As a strategy, not only was it simple, but the potential results were well worth the hassle too.

As the entire conversation had happened last night, Haruka was probably already in the classroom.

Given the flow of their conversation, it seemed like the others would take up the role of heading to school early for the other two days, so it was probably fine even if I didn't do anything.

The vote was taking place in three days. In other words, the specifics regarding who we were going to focus our censure votes on would need to be finalized by today at the latest. For the time being, it'd be lucky if the Ayanokōji Group could learn any valuable information in the mornings like Keisei planned.

Meanwhile, as I waited to hear back from Kei about the girls in the class, I thought about scoping out information about the boys from Horikita, who was reigning in Sudō, or Hirata.

After all, it was important to have a grasp on the information as early as possible.

Part 1

It felt like I was finally getting used to my daily life here.

Without noticing, almost a full year had passed since I started living in the dorms.

“It feels like time doesn’t pass by like it used to.”

The passage of time would feel different depending on how much you were enjoying yourself.

Honestly, when I first learned about this phenomenon, I didn’t understand the meaning very well.

Before I started high school, every second of my life had felt exactly the same. But now, it was different.

Obviously, the days were still passing by at the same speed as always. There were still two years left until graduation.

But it was strange. The more I thought about it, the more I felt like graduation day would come along in the blink of an eye.

“Morning Ayanokōji-kun～!”

I heard Ichinose call out from behind me as soon as I stepped outside. It was probably because we both left for school at roughly the same time every morning. I looked behind me and responded to her.

“Ah. Good morning Ichinose.”

Strangely enough, as soon as I called out to her, Ichinose stiffened up for some reason.

“Hmm?”

She was standing perfectly still, frozen with her hand in the air.

“What’s wrong?”

My question seemed to snap her out of the trance she was in as she proceeded to walk over. Although, her movements were still a bit stiff in some respects.

“Wow, uhh… it’s pretty cold again today, huh?”

“I suppose so.”

Our breath was visible in the air as we spoke.

“Did you plan on walking to school with someone?”

“Not at all. I’m usually by myself in the mornings.”

“Well then… do you mind if I join you?”

There probably wasn’t a single student out there capable of turning her down when she asked like this.

I responded with a nod.

“…”

“……”

Whenever the two of us had ended up alone together in the past, Ichinose would usually be the one to start the conversation. This time, however, the only sound breaking the silence between us was the sound of our footsteps as Ichinose walked a short distance behind me.

So, I decided to try asking her about the exam.

“This next special exam must be a pretty difficult thing for you and your class, huh?”

In comparison to the other classes, Class B had overwhelmingly solid teamwork and a strong overall sense of camaraderie.

Being forced to decide on which student to remove would probably be heart-wrenchingly painful for all of them.

“Ah, well… Yeah, I think this exam is the toughest we’ve had by far.

“Probably.”

I could tell as much based on her clouded expression alone.

Ichinose, as the leader of her class, was the only one who was absolutely safe.

Compared to Hirata or Kushida, she was in a completely different situation altogether. She seemed like the only student effectively guaranteed to make it through the exam.

And this was why having to cut someone from the class was such a painful decision for her.

She may as well stick to the sidelines and not get involved with the vote at all. It would probably be less stressful for her that way.

It might've been possible for Ichinose to do something like that, but…

"In the face of such a terrible exam… I really have no choice but to do something, don't I?"

"Well, that's probably true."

"…Yeah. I must do something."

She walked up beside me as she said this.

From the side, I could see a thin smile on her face.

"Are you… thinking of dropping out yourself, Ichinose?"

"Eh? No way. I definitely didn't say anything like that."

She denied it, but the look in her eyes gave another impression.

That she was fully prepared to make that choice if she needed to.

"Just for the record, your classmates wouldn't be willing to vote for you very easily."

"I told you that I never said anything about dropping out myself. But, if you really think so then I guess you're probably right about that."

"The fact that you've been considering it is written all over your face."

“R-really?”

Ichinose hurriedly tried to confirm it.

Was this natural or was she doing it on purpose?

It seemed to be the former this time.

“Haa… Keep it a secret from everyone okay?”

“Are you really willing to sacrifice yourself for someone else’s sake?”

“Not exactly. I just feel like I have to fight, and bear responsibility for the risk on my own.”

Bear responsibility for the risk on my own, huh?

In other words, she had no intention of taking the easy way out by passively watching from the sidelines.

“I don’t understand. Is this your own way of paying tribute to the classmate who gets expelled?”

Even though it would mean more coming from Ichinose than from someone else, it still wasn’t something they’d want.

Either way, I simply couldn’t imagine that student leaving the school with a smile on their face.

“There’s not much more I can tell you. It’s not something I’d like other people to hear about. Furthermore, you’re in Class C. No matter what kind of exam it is, there are times where we just aren’t able to collaborate.”

“That’s certainly true.”

If anything, the most we were able to discuss with one another was about the praise votes.

If you were able to secure Ichinose’s vote, you’d be in a somewhat favorable starting position for the rest of the exam.

Be that as it may, Ichinose wasn’t a student who needed praise votes

in the first place. Even so, she wouldn't just simply hand over her vote in exchange for private points either. So I didn't even try to bring it up.

Even if, for argument's sake, I bought her vote, in the end it wouldn't amount to anything more than a lucky charm.

"Anywho, the school is pretty terrible, isn't it? What with making someone drop out of school and all. Even if you manage to get praise votes from the kids in the other classes, someone still has to leave in the end."

Not everyone was welcoming this exam, especially given that they forcing the expulsions just as the first year was coming to an end.

"Will you be alright, Ayanokōji-kun?"

"Well, it's hard to say… I'm not a very important student in my class."

"Then, if you're alright with it, I may be able to work something out."

"Meaning?"

"Since I have a praise vote I can use on someone in another class, I could use it on you."

She brought up a topic that I had intentionally decided against bringing up only moments earlier.

"Though, it's only one vote, so it may not be worth very much…"

"I'm thankful for your offer, but I must decline. Your vote would be wasted on someone like me."

"That's not true at all! Rather, I honestly think it would be the most justified vote in the entire exam. It's meant to be for someone worthy of praise in another class. Yeah, I can't think of anyone more worthy than you, as the one who saved me."

Her words were extremely difficult to respond to.

“I see. Well, then, if something comes up, I’ll reach out to you.”

“Sweet. I’ll remember that.”

With that, Ichinose let show a smile.

“Good morning Honami.”

I heard someone call out to Ichinose from behind us.

“Good morning to you, Asahina-senpai.”

“Well aren’t *you* looking lively today? By the way, you two are in separate classes, right? You guys must be on pretty good terms then, yeah?”

“Err, yes. He’s a good friend…”

Ichinose seemed a little embarrassed with her answer.

“Oh～? A good friend, huh?”

It would’ve caused fewer misunderstandings if she hadn’t responded like that.

“Well, whatever. Anyway, I’d like to borrow Ayanokōji-kun for a bit, is that alright?”

Asahina had approached the two of us, hoping that Ichinose would take her leave so she could talk to me alone.

“I understand. Well then, Ayanokōji-kun, I’ll be going on ahead.”

With no particular signs of discontent, Ichinose bowed her head, following along with Asahina’s request.

“Sorry Honami. See ya.”

“Oh no! Please excuse me.”

I didn’t sense anything abnormal about their short conversation.

Instead, it seemed like the two shared a proper senpai-kouhai

relationship.

“She’s a real good kid isn’t she? Cute. Smart. Even among the second-years, nobody has anything bad to say about her.”

“That’s true. Ichinose seems quite popular with pretty much everyone among the first-years as well.”

“Could it be that you’ve managed to gain her affection?”

It seemed that Ichinose’s somewhat unnatural behavior hadn’t gone unnoticed.

“No way.”

Ichinose aside, I wanted to keep my time with Asahina as short as possible.

It’d raise suspicions if we were to be seen by one of Nagumo’s underlings. If she really had something to say then it’d be best to deal with it quickly.

“If you have business with me, I’ll hear you out.”

“How boring. Well whatever. I happened to see the two of you acting all buddy buddy, so I wanted to tell you something.”

Asahina had been smiling cheerfully for a while now, but that smile quickly disappeared.

“I’ve heard a bit about the first-years’ exam. Somebody’s being forced to drop out of school, yeah?”

“It looks like it.”

It seems the news had already managed to spread to the second-year students.

“Honami cares deeply for her friends, or how should I put it… You know she’s not the type of person who would sit back and let someone from Class B be expelled, right?”

“That should be true. I think everyone is interested in where B class is going to end up, even though no one talks about it.”

My response was a bit bland, but it managed to convey my thoughts easily enough.

“Then, how do you think Honami will go about tackling the exam?”

Asahina looked at me with prying eyes.

Rather than merely being curious about my response, it was more like she was trying to coax a particular answer out of me.

In which case, giving her a roundabout answer would probably be counterproductive.

“Assuming that she plans on preventing the expulsion… Class B has a considerable amount of private points saved up. So she would just need to make up for the rest of the points she needs somehow and stop the expulsion from happening altogether. Something like that, right?”

“Bingo. Well, that *is* the only logical conclusion.”

If you were working under the assumption that she would try to prevent the expulsion, anyone would’ve been able to come to the same conclusion.

The tricky thing was, there weren’t very many people who could make it happen.

Managing to somehow gather together 20 million private points was exceedingly difficult.

“It seems she’s gone and asked Miyabi for assistance. Can you guess how he responded?”

“He consented immediately?”

“…Bingo again.”

Based on the course of events so far, there simply weren’t any other

possibilities.

“I’ll ask just to make sure, but there’s no way she’d be lent enough private points with no strings attached, is there?”

Even though Class B possessed a large number of private points, they were still probably short by a sizable amount.

Several hundred thousand points still wouldn’t be enough.

“Of course there isn’t. Sure, it’d be a different story if we were only talking about a few thousand points. In that case, there’d be plenty of room for discussion. But once it gets into the hundred thousands or the millions? Nobody’s gonna give away that many.”

Asahina answered without hesitation.

“The third and second-year students have to be thoroughly prepared for the special exams awaiting us moving forward. Whether we’ll need our own private points or not won’t become clear to us until the very end, so there shouldn’t be any room for charity just for a couple of first-years.”

She was probably right.

This was also the very reason why Chabashira had spoken about it so impassively.

Even if you managed to secure some private points from the upperclassmen, it would be nearly impossible for them to hand over a relevant amount. You could sweeten the deal by offering to pay it back with interest, but that wouldn’t mean anything to the third-years who were so close to graduating. Furthermore, even if you managed to secure a loan from a second-year student, it still seemed impossible to secure such a large number of points.

“If there’s someone capable of meeting these expectations, president Nagumo’s the only one who comes to mind.”

“He’s gone and saved up quite a lot of points after all.”

“So what happened?”

I asked her this, but based on the flow of the conversation, the answer was already clear as day.

Even so, given that Ichinose seemed to be hesitant about something, there were probably conditions attached to Nagumo's cooperation.

"Don't be so anxious. I'm in the same class as the guy, which is exactly why I have my doubts that he'd go and carelessly lend such a large number of points to a kouhai. Honami's such a cute girl, right? There's absolutely no way she'll end up being expelled because of this exam, yeah?"

"I guess so. It does seem like the strategy is to prevent one of her classmates from being expelled."

"So I'm personally not a fan of her entering into this kind of deal with him. Of course, it's partly for the sake of my own class but… more than that I guess I just feel sorry for her."

"Are the conditions he's set too harsh? Like an obscenely high interest rate?"

"That guy… The condition he set for lending the points to her… is for the two of them to get into a relationship."

"I see."

Considering everything Nagumo had done so far, this definitely seemed like something he'd do.

A relationship in exchange for a loan of private points.

Generally speaking, this condition was anything but normal. It wouldn't be strange if he was turned down immediately. But, if it was for the sake of protecting her class, there was a possibility that Ichinose would agree to it, and Nagumo probably understood this as well.

"Is it alright? For you to be telling me this?"

"I've already told you. It's for my class. If Miyabi lends all those private points to a first-year, the rest of us may suffer as a result.

Furthermore, in exchange for protecting her friends, Honami'll have to go through something painful."

"Maybe so, but why are you coming to me with this? I'm in Class C. We have a hostile relationship with Ichinose."

"I dunno. But, if it's you, you'll probably be able to do something about it one way or another."

"You're overestimating me. There's no way I can afford to make up for Class B's lack of points."

It would be a different story if it were possible to gather up enough points without relying on Nagumo, but that wouldn't work either.

"Oh really? Well, you two are rivals…"

Actively helping out a rival class would be far too foolish when we should be feeling thankful for the loss of a potential threat. In the first place, it would require several million points, so everyone in Class C would have to band together to help out. It would be absolutely impossible.

"I can't do anything about it."

"That's okay. Even if you don't do anything, I won't hold it against you. It's just wishful thinking on my part either way. That said, even though you say you can't, I think you just might take the chance anyway."

After giving me a slap on the back, Asahina began to leave.

"Anyways, I've told you everything you need to know. I'll be leaving the rest up to you!"

With that, Asahina ran toward the school without saying another word.

Based on her behavior and the way she spoke, she didn't seem to be lying.

"Striking a deal with Nagumo, huh?"

It wasn't very becoming of her, but it seemed that this was Ichinose's strategy.

If she really ended up going through with it, she'd be able to prevent the loss of one of her classmates. It was a way of fighting available to her solely because of her united class and the huge sum of points they had saved up together. However, based on the way Asahina was speaking, it seemed that the requirement of a relationship was a high hurdle for Ichinose. After all, if Nagumo's condition wasn't actually weighing heavily on her, it'd be safer to borrow the private points before Nagumo could change his mind.

Well, it's difficult to make a quick decision when it comes to a full-on relationship with someone of the opposite sex.

It'd be fine if it was simply a matter of cooperation, but there was absolutely nothing I could do about so many private points.

Class B was probably short by about four to five million points, which was well beyond the scope of something I was able to help with.

It'd be more cost-effective to cut ties with your classmates, but how would Ichinose weigh the options if she put Nagumo's condition on the scale…?

"Given her personality…"

How would things turn out moving forward? It wasn't very difficult to imagine.

Part 2

The special exam was a difficult subject to talk about in class.

There was such a bad atmosphere hanging over the classroom that it felt like you could reach out and feel the tension in the air.

“Mornin’ Kiyopon.”

“Good morning.”

I exchanged greetings with Haruka as I sat down in my seat.

I couldn’t feel any enthusiasm from the expressions of the students who had already arrived in the classroom.

The idea of being targeted by censure votes had gotten in the way of normal class relations, making them impossible to maintain. This was probably going to continue until the end of the special exam.

And it would probably even continue for a while after that.

[The classroom’s atmosphere is super gloomy, isn’t it?]

Haruka messaged me personally.

[Anything unusual?]

[Nothing yet. Sure enough, they’re all on guard, aren’t they~?]

In the classroom, it was impossible to know when somebody could be listening.

No one would carelessly drop specific names about who they intended to vote for.

[Here’s hoping for better luck tomorrow, then.]

[Yeah.]

After this short exchange, I put away my cell phone.

Without standing out or causing any problems for the class, we'd simply sit back and wait for the storm to pass.

If only our classmates would allow us to have such an easy way out of this.

Part 3

When lunch break arrived, I made my way toward the library.

It's not that I was dissatisfied with passing the time together with the Ayanokōji Group; it's just that I felt that it was important that we spend some time apart every once in a while. Besides, in the library, there was a particular student who loves books just as much as I do.

Sure enough, Shiina Hiyori had come to the library today as well. I casually chose a book from the shelves, and shortly after sitting down and skimming it a bit to decide if I wanted to borrow it or not, someone spoke up.

"Good afternoon, Ayanokōji-kun."

Having just entered the lunch break, there were only a few people in the library, so she seemed to notice my presence immediately.

She was holding a book that was of a similar genre to my own in her hand.

"It seems that you're as much of a bookworm as ever."

"Well, the library is such a wonderful place."

After softly asking for permission, Hiyori sat down in the seat beside me.

Together, the two of us quietly read our books.

Students with a natural love for the library had no need for excessive conversation.

You could say that the act of reading a book was, in itself, a form of conversation.

Just like that, we read our books without uttering a word until just

before the end of lunch.

Probably around half an hour had passed before I spoke up.

“It’s probably about time we head back.”

“It seems like it.”

After looking up at the clock to check the time, I decided against leaving just yet.

“By the way, Hiyori. There’s something I’d like to ask you about.”

“What is it?”

Unsure of what I wanted to ask, she curiously looked up from her book.

“It’s about Ryūen’s current situation.”

“Ryūen-kun’s situation, is it…? To be honest, it’s not very good.”

“So he’s Class D’s top choice for expulsion after all.”

“Yes. Pretty much everybody in the class has agreed to cast a censure vote for him.”

“Has Ryūen himself also accepted it?”

“I believe he has. In fact, he’s been visiting the library after school lately and I’ve been able to chat with him a little bit, so I feel fairly certain of it.”

The book he was reading when I saw him at the cafe earlier had been borrowed from the library.

It got me to think that he had probably been in touch with Hiyori which, after coming here, seemed to be correct.

“What do you think of all this, Hiyori?”

“It’s a pity, but we simply can’t avoid the expulsion. So, I’m ready to accept the fact that we’re going to lose someone, potentially even me.

Though, if Class D really wants to reach for the top again… I've been starting to think that we might need Ryūen-kun…"

She probably has some misgivings about Ryūen, but it appears as though she recognizes his true capabilities.

Speaking of which, I couldn't recall Ryūen ever treating Hiyori roughly before.

"Sorry I asked about it. I was just interested in the current state of Class-"

I cut myself off, at a loss for words.

"No… I guess I just don't want Ryūen to be expelled from school."

I didn't need to come all the way here today.

However, I wanted to know what was happening with Ryūen, so I ended up coming anyway.

"It's better to keep as many friends as you can, isn't it?"

"…Yeah."

It felt kinda strange somehow. We weren't supposed to be anything but enemies after all.

"Uhm…"

"Hm?"

"This… I don't think somebody like me should be saying this, but…"

Although it seemed a bit difficult to say, Hiyori continued.

"Ayanokōji-kun, please don't drop out of school, okay…? With everything that's been happening, I just don't want my precious friend to disappear as well."

"I'll do my best."

I gratefully accepted Hiyori's concerns as we parted ways and headed

back to our respective classrooms.

Part 4

The bad atmosphere persisted even after classes had ended.

Whether she minded it or not, my neighbor Horikita quietly began to prepare her belongings just like always.

It was difficult to tackle an exam like this one by yourself. Usually, you would want to think about making as many allies as possible, yet Horikita didn't show any intention of doing such a thing.

Putting it optimistically, Sudō was pretty much the only person guaranteed to cast their praise vote for Horikita.

That said…

I recalled Horikita's confrontation with Ryūen the other day.

Pondering over what she wanted to gain from him and what she lacked as a person had allowed me to understand her strategy moving forward.

It seemed as though she intended to handle this exam in a different way from everybody else, but that wasn't an easy road to take.

However, if she could really pull it off, it'd be a wish come true as far as I was concerned. I'd be able to treat her strategy and mine as the same thing, and have Horikita take responsibility for all of it.

I turned and looked throughout the classroom, envisioning how Horikita saw our classmates.

"It's rare that you haven't tried to ask me for advice yet. You're really fine with the exam?"

Even though it had only been a day, I decided to confirm whether Horikita had changed or not.

"Even if I asked you for advice, it's not like you'd give me a straight answer."

“Certainly.”

Horikita was gradually beginning to understand that I wouldn’t give out advice so easily.

“Besides… This isn’t exactly the type of exam where you can just go and ask your classmates for help.”

“Many of the other students have been forming groups in order to secure praise votes, though.”

“If people want to do that, then they are perfectly free to do so.”

Horikita finished gathering up her things and got up from her seat.

“Then, what are you going to do?”

“What I can.”

With these words, Horikita left the classroom.

As I was a bit curious, I decided to follow after her.

“What is it?”

She stared at me with a bit of a scowl, displeased that I had followed after her.

“I’m a little interested in what you’re going to do.”

“You usually don’t like to involve yourself with me, so why now?”

Why, huh?

Put simply, it was because I was looking forward to the strategy she had decided on.

If she really put it into action, I wanted to fully support her.

That said, I didn’t intend to say this to her here.

“You haven’t joined a group yet, right? If you’re in a pinch, I can help you.”

“Is that how it is? More or less, you’re worried about my situation, aren’t you? If I asked you for help, you’re saying that you’d let me join that group you’re a part of?

“It wouldn’t be troublesome for us to take in another person.”

“Even though I appreciate the offer, I must refuse. You aren’t the person I’m looking for right now.”

It appeared as though she had already resolved herself.

However, her resources were limited and she was still at the point where she was being driven by her anxiety.

I probably wasn’t the right person to make up for those deficiencies.

“You really…”

She scowled at me even more intensely than before.

“What?”

“Just leave me alone.”

She spoke harshly, stopping me in my tracks.

If I were to continue to follow Horikita, it would only serve to make her angrier.

After watching her leave, I gazed through the hallway window for a moment, taking in the view.

“I guess I’ll head home for today.”

“…Could I bother you for a moment, Ayanokōji-kun?”

As if he was just passing by, Hirata showed up. It made me wonder if he had followed behind me as well.

Judging from the timing, he had probably been waiting for Horikita and I to separate.

“If it’s alright with you, could you join me for a bit after school? I

need to talk with you.”

It was a rare invitation from Hirata, one which I had no particular reason to turn down.

As I responded to him with a nod, Hirata let out a sigh of relief.

After passing a full day immersed in the strained atmosphere of the classroom, he seemed to be the most worn out student in the class.

Of course, I could infer this was largely related to the special exam.

“Alright, how about meeting near the southern entrance of Keyaki Mall at half-past four?”

“Sure.”

That was all we said to each other.

It didn’t seem like it was something we could talk about here.

After all, the students heading off to club activities and returning home were constantly walking past us.

I had been planning to meet up with Keisei and the others after school today, so I had to tell them that I was going to be a little late. Hirata seemed to be busy talking with his friends for the time being, so I decided to head to Keyaki Mall ahead of him.

Part 5

After leaving the classroom, I immediately headed toward the front entrance of the school.

On the way, I happened to come across Class A's Sakayanagi Arisu. I could see Kamuro standing beside her.

"Ayanokōji…"

On guard, Kamuro's body stiffened up.

However, as usual, Sakayanagi didn't show any changes. She kept herself composed with relaxed, calm movements.

The contrasting reactions between the two of them were a little interesting.

"What a coincidence. Ayanokōji-kun."

"Indeed. Is there something you need with Class C?"

The two of them appeared to be headed toward Class C.

However, rather than answering me, Sakayanagi brushed off my question with a smile as she asked me one instead.

"Where are you off to now?"

"I have plans to meet up with a friend at Keyaki Mall in around half an hour."

"Is that so? It seems that you're living your life to the fullest. If you don't mind, could you spare me just a little of your time?"

Sakayanagi took out her cell phone and checked the time.

Had she come this way just to meet up with me? No, that would be

difficult to imagine.

It was still only ten minutes past four.

Even if it took several minutes to reach Keyaki Mall, there would still be over ten minutes left until 4:30.

“Are you fine with standing as we talk?”

“Yes. Though, we’ll attract attention if we talk here. How about we move someplace else?”

“Alright.”

I also wanted to avoid standing out as much as possible.

It would’ve been different if it was with a classmate, but Sakayanagi was the type to attract attention whether she wanted to or not.

Since she was definitely aware of this herself, we began moving to a less populated location.

Matching Sakayanagi’s slow walking pace, time passed by as we moved through the building.

“At any rate… Ayanokōji-kun, Masumi-san. Don’t you think this supplemental exam is far too unreasonable? They’ve decided to force expulsions on us just because nobody has been expelled yet. Setting up an exam like this one… Thinking about it rationally, it’s ridiculous.”

“Totally. Mashima-sensei’s usually pretty composed but even he’s been giving off a sorta shaken vibe recently.”

It seemed like the other teachers weren’t satisfied with the supplementary exam either.

Sakayanagi and Kamuro continued to talk.

“There *is* a reason for that.”

“What, you know something?”

“It’s a personal matter that I’m a bit ashamed of, but my father was suspended from his position a few days ago.”

“Suspended… Your father… If I’m not mistaken, he’s the board chairman right?”

Having known about Sakayanagi’s father already, Kamuro pressed for more information.

“I haven’t heard about it in detail, but it seems that quite a few unfavorable *things* have come out regarding my father. The father I know is not the type of person who would dirty his hands with those sorts of matters. Of course, I can’t rule out the possibility that I, as his daughter, simply didn’t know about it, but… it’s also true that someone may have planned all of this in order to force Father out of his position.”

On the surface, these words had been spoken to Kamuro, but in reality, they were probably meant for me. If Sakayanagi’s father really was innocent, it wouldn’t be surprising if ‘*that man*’ had a hand in all of this.

The impression I had of Sakayanagi’s father may not have been a misunderstanding after all.

“That said, this is something that has absolutely nothing to do with students like us. It’s nothing but simple, idle chatter.”

It seemed that Sakayanagi didn’t see her father’s forced suspension as anything worth paying attention to.

“Even so, what does any of that have to do with the exam?”

“Don’t you think it’s possible that the school hastily prepared the exam… all for the sake of forcing a certain someone’s expulsion?”

“Someone…”

Kamuro glanced over at me for an instant before immediately returning her gaze to Sakayanagi.

“I’ve tried not being bothered by it until now, but you… Why have

you been keeping your eye on Ayanokōji?”

Kamuro asked as she walked beside Sakayanagi.

“Oh? You’ve tried not being bothered by it until now, have you?”

“…Of course I have.”

Kamuro denied Sakayanagi’s implications, but the look on Sakayanagi’s face was one that seemed to fully understand everything.

However, instead of pressing the matter any further, she returned to Kamuro’s question.

“I simply know him from a long time ago. Is this answer not acceptable enough?”

Contrasting with Kamuro’s concern, Sakayanagi answered nonchalantly.

Considering the fact that she hadn’t told Kamuro anything before, it was a fairly revealing answer.

It was also possible that she was trying to gauge my reaction. If I were to react poorly or carelessly interrupt their conversation, then it could end up being exposed as a weakness.

Well, in reality, I didn’t really care.

“So you’re saying that the two of you just coincidentally reunited here? That’s such a slim possibility though.”

“Yes. The possibility is indeed slim. Right, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“Maybe so.”

While I had never once been acquainted with her before coming here, there technically wasn’t anything incorrect about what she said.

Back then, our knowledge of each other was definitely one-sided.

“Then, is he really a difficult person to handle? Sorry, but I just don’t

see it at all.”

Just as Sakayanagi had done earlier, Kamuro got straight to the point.

In some sense, perhaps the two of them really were similar.

“You’ve become quite inquisitive lately, haven’t you? Up until now, I don’t think you’ve ever thrown me this kind of question before.”

It appeared as though the few times I’d made direct contact with Kamuro had given her some ideas of her own.

Perhaps this had sparked some kind of uncontrollable curiosity within Sakayanagi as well.

“You can ask anyone and they’d probably be thinking the same thing. You’ve never been so fixated on someone like this before.”

“You came across to me as a particularly indifferent person who didn’t like to interfere with other people’s affairs. That was why I had no reservations with asking you to keep an eye on Ayanokōji-kun, but… you’re quite hopeless, aren’t you?”

Sakayanagi sounded a little surprised, while also a bit delighted in some respects.

I had thought she was only saying this to see my reaction, but she just might have been asking these mean-spirited questions because she was interested in Kamuro’s responses instead.

As they talked, we arrived at our destination.

“Nobody will bother us if we talk here.”

We had arrived at the special building. It certainly was quiet, given that it was after school.

“Well, Masumi-san. I apologize, but please head on back to the dorms without me.”

Sakayanagi apparently had Kamuro walk all the way here simply

because she wanted a conversation partner.

“…Whatever.”

Sakayanagi ultimately decided to send Kamuro back home without saying too much about me at all.

Kamuro turned and walked down the stairway without resisting, making me wonder if she knew it would turn out this way all along.

“Was that okay?”

“Yes. Wouldn’t you have found it troublesome if I went and revealed something?”

“Not particularly.”

If I showed any signs of weakness here, I’d be giving her a chance to take advantage of it.

Furthermore, there was no need to give Sakayanagi any extra information.

“I see that I’ve been recognized as your enemy. I suppose I’m willing to accept that for the time being.”

My response and the reasoning behind it were so obvious that Sakayanagi understood the meaning behind my words without any issues.

“Going so far as to have Kamuro head back without you, what are you looking to talk to me about?”

We had spent a lot of time coming out here, so there wasn’t too much left until my meeting with Hirata.

I urged her to get to the point.

“It’s about the promise we made with each other.”

“I agreed to face off with you during the next special exam. That is, this exam.”

“Yes, that was certainly the plan. However… if it’s alright with you, I would like to put it off until next time. This supplementary exam isn’t a competition between the classes. Rather, it’s a screening process for us to evaluate our own peers. The only way we can influence the other classes is with praise votes, and we can’t attack one another even if we wanted to… So wouldn’t it be fine if we postponed our match until next time?”

In other words, she was here to tell me that this particular special exam didn’t count since it wasn’t a befitting scene for our competition.

“Are you willing to accept this proposal?”

“Make whatever decision you want.”

Since I had given her the response she was looking for, Sakayanagi respectfully expressed her gratitude.

“Thank you very much. I had been wondering what I would have to do if you didn’t agree. Now, I’ll be free to focus my attention on Class A’s internal politics. Though…”

“Though?”

“Because we’ve agreed to a ceasefire, I suppose I’ll tell you something in order to gain your trust. For this exam, I won’t do anything that would put you at a disadvantage. That is to say, I absolutely won’t cast you any censure votes.”

She gave her word, restricting her own actions moving forward.

“In the unlikely event that I were to interfere with Class C somehow and negatively impact your results… I wouldn’t mind accepting my loss. It would be perfectly acceptable for you to refuse to have a match with me during the next exam.”

“If my classmates were to focus their censure votes on me, there wouldn’t be a next time in the first place.”

I’d then be expelled. End of story.

“You are certainly right about that. Either way, please have some peace of mind. That’s all I’m trying to say.”

Her words were more than just courteous, but I guess these were the steps she needed to take in order to gain my trust.

“Perhaps it’s possible that your subordinates betray you before our match can even happen.”

“Fufu, you’re quite the funny one.”

Nearly every student in Class A was part of the Sakayanagi faction.

She was confident that the class wouldn’t dare attempt to remove its own leader.

“I had already decided who would be expelled as soon as the exam was announced.”

“You decided early on who’d be removed? Sounds like the right decision.”

Sakayanagi was able to make this decision precisely because she sat at the very top of her class.

“So, when do you plan on telling your class who it is?”

“I already told them all a long time ago. Had I waited until the last minute to inform them, it would’ve only caused anxiety in its own way. By making it known ahead of time, it’s easier on the rest of the class, don’t you agree?”

It would be unbearable for the student slated to be forced out of the school.

However, the rest of the class would be able to avoid falling into disarray.

“Do you know who it is I’ve chosen, if I may ask?”

“Who knows. I don’t have the slightest idea.”

Despite having stated otherwise, I had a fairly good idea.

“Katsuragi Kōhei-kun.”

“A reasonable choice?”

“He’s the former leader of Class A who opposed me earlier in the year. There’s no need for two people to stand at the top of the same class, after all.”

Katsuragi is a calm and composed person.

He most likely understood that he’d be the scapegoat the moment he heard the details of the exam.

He had seemingly accepted his fate without resistance.

There were still some students who continued to follow Katsuragi like Yahiko, but they were greatly outnumbered.

“I know you’ve seen him as an enemy since the beginning, but I was under the impression that he had stepped back from trying to lead the class.”

Even among Class A, Katsuragi ranked high in terms of overall excellence.

I felt it would be a pity to lose him, but it seemed that Sakayanagi felt differently.

“Among my friends, many already hate him. They simply can’t agree with his conservative way of thinking. With that being the case, I can raise morale by showing him the door instead.”

She appeared to be making a trade-off between losing out on combat power and boosting the morale of the class as a whole.

“Is it alright for you to be telling me this? About who you’re targeting?”

“It’s not like you’re going to do anything behind the scenes to protect him right, Ayanokōji-kun?”

It didn’t seem like I’d get any results that would make it worth the effort.

“What are you planning to do with Class C?”

“Who knows. I won’t be taking part in it. I intend to leave all the decision-making to my classmates.”

“When it comes down to it… it’s as simple as removing one of the annoying ones, or even one of the incompetent ones.”

Sakayanagi seemed to be enjoying herself as she thought about it.

“There’s no need to think about what Class D intends to do. They’re clearly going to rid themselves of Ryūen-kun.”

I didn’t have any objections for her.

For Class A, there were no particular advantages to lending Ryūen a hand.

Class A most likely wanted to see him expelled, even if it meant giving up a chance to get rid of the binding contract he had made with Katsuragi.

“Though, I have no idea what Class B will do. For this entire exam, I’m looking forward to seeing who gets expelled from that intimate class the most. Though, perhaps Ichinose-san has come up with something interesting?”

“Sorry. It’s about time I go.”

She was free to have as many delusions as she pleased. It’s just that I would much rather she do it on her own.

“You’re right. We can leave our conversation here for the time being. After all, the next special exam begins next week.”

The distinctive noise of her cane striking the ground resounded throughout the hallway.

For a split second, Sakayanagi’s gaze turned to the surveillance cameras set up near the ceiling.

The movement was so subtle that I wouldn’t have been able to notice it if I hadn’t been watching her closely.

I wasn’t able to determine whether it was intentional or just a random, casual glance somewhere else.

“Well then, our match will be decided by the final special exam of the year, just as we had originally planned. It’s a promise.”

I responded with a small nod before leaving the special building.

Part 6

There weren't very many stores that were suitable enough for meeting up after school.

Usually, people would meet at the cafe in Keyaki Mall, but today was different.

"Thanks for coming today."

"It's no big deal, Hirata. I wanted to talk to you as well."

"I'm happy to hear that. Anyway, how about we walk for a bit?"

After joining up together at the southern entrance, Hirata did a quick check of the surrounding area before we started walking.

"Sorry Ayanokōji-kun. Do you mind if I change our plans a little?"

"How so?"

"Is it a problem if we talk in my room instead? I think I'd feel better if we did."

"I don't particularly mind either way."

"Thanks for understanding."

It seemed as though the mall wasn't a very good place for what he wanted to talk about.

Looks like he didn't want anyone to listen in on our conversation.

Hirata initiated some small talk as we walked toward the dormitories.

"Our first year is already almost over. How did yours go, Ayanokōji-kun?"

He let out a sigh as he looked up to the sky.

“Between being sent to the uninhabited island and being forced to participate in the training camp, it was quite the tiring year.”

“Yeah. It was definitely tough, but I still had fun. Ever since enrolling here, I feel like I’ve been able to successfully build trusting relationships with the people around me.”

“Yeah, I think so too.”

I didn’t deny it. There were still many people in the class who hated one another. However, I suppose the enemy of an enemy is a friend. Throughout the process of being forced to work together, bonds had gradually begun to take shape.

“Honestly… There were never any problems until this exam started.”

A shadow loomed over Hirata’s smiling face.

“Is that what you wanted to talk about?”

“Yep. Sorry… I’m well aware that you don’t want to talk about it.”

I wouldn’t actively involve myself, no matter what kind of special exam it was.

During previous exams, Horikita had always disregarded my feelings and asked for my cooperation.

Interestingly enough, it was the exact opposite for this exam.

Horikita didn’t turn to me for help, while Hirata did.

It appeared as though Horikita was steadily becoming more and more mature these days.

Perhaps she had come to understand that I wouldn’t cooperate, as the frequency of her requests was also petering out, little by little.

“This exam… I just can’t think of a solution. No matter how many times I think about it, nothing comes to mind.”

“No matter how many times…”

Looking closely, I could see dark circles beneath Hirata's eyes.

It made me wonder if he had been thinking about the exam all night, unable to get enough sleep.

"It sounds difficult. In an exam like this one, the more you think about your classmates, the harder it gets."

"Eh…?"

"Never mind, don't worry about it."

If I were to say something careless here, Hirata would only plunge even deeper into the darkness.

For now, it was probably best just to leave it alone.

"If… if there's a way to save the class, please tell me."

Because of my response, he had somehow gotten the wrong idea, thinking that I had an answer for him.

"Do you really think it's impossible to save up 20 million private points?"

"I've tried running the numbers, but it's just not possible to get that many points. Yesterday, I tried to casually bring it up with my upperclassmen in the soccer club, but they're all waiting for the special exams they'll be facing after this."

"They weren't able to spare any points, then?"

"Yeah…"

At the end of the day, the number of methods available to avoid losing someone was far too limited.

"Sorry, I can't think of anything else. I'll definitely tell you if I do."

"Is that so… Well, thank you."

It was the best answer I could give him at this point.

Trying his hardest to smile, Hirata thanked me.

This special exam was extremely easy, yet also exceedingly difficult.

If you change your point of view a little bit, the true goal of this exam becomes incredibly clear.

But Hirata couldn't see it.

This was just an exam for us to *remove an unnecessary student*.

From the moment Chabashira explained the rules, both Kōenji and I had already determined the end point of the exam.

Of course, there's no way of knowing '*who*' would be expelled. All that mattered was making sure it wasn't '*you*'.

However, it was different for people like Hirata.

He'd never be able to get past knowing '*who*' would be expelled.

This was why he had gotten stuck within a maze, unable to find the exit.

"Ayanokōji-kun, do you think it's fine for someone to be expelled?"

"It would be nice if nobody's expelled when the exam is over. But that's difficult in this case."

"…Of course. You're right. But, there must be somethi-"

"Haven't you had a hard time sleeping because you already know the answer to that?"

I spoke up, interrupting him.

"That's…"

Silence came between us as we approached the entrance to the

dormitories.

This was mainly because we could see several students chatting in the lobby.

The true problem, however, was a bit deeper than that.

Our eyes met with a certain person sitting on one of the lobby sofas.

“Well well well. If it isn’t Hirata boy and Ayanokōji boy. What a *toootal* coincidence this must be.”

“Hey Kōenji-kun. You waiting for someone?”

He seemed to notice our gazes immediately after we entered the building.

“Are you saying you’d be concerned if I had plans to meet with someone?”

Kōenji responded to Hirata’s question with a question of his own.

“I might think it’s unusual.”

“I don’t dislike your honesty, but unfortunately I am not.”

Although he had answered the question, it still didn’t explain what he was doing here.

Generally speaking, Kōenji wasn’t the kind of person to spend his time hanging around in a place like this.

“Let’s go.”

Hirata walked to the elevator and reached out to press the call button.

Thereupon, Kōenji abruptly spoke up from behind us.

“Well, you’d better be doing your best to muster up the wisdom to make it through this exam.”

“…You never change, do you, Kōenji-kun?”

Hirata asked, Kōenji's attitude seeming to weigh on his mind a little.

Hirata's finger had stopped just short of pressing the button.

"There's no reason for me to change for an exam like this."

"Is that really true?"

It was rare to see Hirata getting worked up like this.

He turned around and faced Kōenji. Of course, he still didn't glare at him.

Hirata was always calm and composed, until the very end.

"You say there's no reason for you to change, but honestly, I'm wondering if you're the one who needs to change more than anyone. I'm worried that… our classmates might single you out and make an example of you."

This was both Hirata's way of showing concern and making a threat.

They were words that strongly conveyed his desire for cooperation.

Hirata was hoping that Kōenji would have some interest, even if only a little.

"Your concerns are unfounded. Rather, shouldn't *you*, the leader of the class, be the one doing something to save *me*?"

Until the very end, Kōenji had no intention of changing this 'do nothing' stance of his.

"There are things that even I can't do. I may not be able to live up to your expectations."

"Oh you definitely can."

Despite Hirata's lack of self-confidence, Kōenji piled expectations on him without the slightest bit of hesitation.

I found myself wondering if he was being sincere or not, but I was unable to tell.

Getting up from the sofa, Kōenji approached Hirata and lightly patted him on the shoulder.

“After you’re done licking your classmate’s wounds, please be sure to throw out the unnecessary trash.”

The moment these words left Kōenji’s mouth, Hirata firmly pushed the call button.

“…Let’s go Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Yeah.”

Hirata’s tone, which had been amicable up until this point, now contained slight traces of anger.

There is trash among our classmates.

Hirata probably couldn’t help but feel irritated by what Kōenji had implied.

He only spoke up after the elevator door closed behind us.

“Haa… Sorry. I let you see something a bit unseemly.”

“Don’t worry about it. Kōenji’s opinions are troublesome.”

Hirata forced a light smile and slightly lowered his head.

“So he struck a chord with you back there as well… Deep down, I know that preventing the expulsion is unrealistic. Despite everything, somewhere on the inside, I’ve already given up.”

The elevator arrived at Hirata’s floor. We disembarked and headed over to his room.

“Come on in.”

“Sorry for intruding…”

This was the first time I had been in Hirata’s room. Fundamentally speaking, the interior decor was simple, similar to my own room. There was a light, gentle scent in the air, similar to that of air

freshener.

Although it was a bit plain, it was becoming of him. A very well-arranged room.

“Have a seat. Would you like some coffee?”

“Yes. Sorry to bother you.”

“Don’t worry about it. I was the one who asked.”

This was a relatively new experience for me, since I was usually the one entertaining guests.

“As a continuation of what we were talking about a bit ago…”

He spoke up once again as he prepared the coffee in the kitchen.

“I wonder if there’s really no way to save everyone.”

“I wonder. Maybe I just can’t think of anything.”

I gave the same answer I did earlier.

Despite knowing that this would be my answer, Hirata still seemed to be looking for salvation.

I had intended for my answer to console him, but this appeared to have been counterproductive.

“If you can’t think of anything, I doubt anyone else will be able to.”

“You’re giving me far too much credit.”

I had no idea when exactly he started to evaluate me so highly.

“I’ve felt that you’re one of the most dependable people in the class ever since that matter with Karuizawa-san.”

Hirata spoke as though he had seen the true nature of my heart.

“I’m not really sure that’s accurate.”

After the water finished boiling, he handed me a cup of coffee.

“I’m being honest. Though, you’re a modest person, so you’ll probably deny it.”

At this point, no matter what I said, it would’ve been a waste of effort.

Even if I denied his claims, Hirata still wouldn’t believe me.

I began to think about how it’d be better to change the subject, but Hirata quickly continued, seeming to anticipate my intention to do so.

“The fact that someone has to be expelled during this exam… I just can’t come to terms with it, no matter how hard I try. There’s no such thing as someone who wouldn’t care if a classmate was forced to leave.”

“It’s not like I don’t get where you’re coming from, but you simply don’t have any other choice. We only have until the weekend to come to a decision.”

“A decision, huh? Ayanokōji-kun… Do you think somebody in particular should be expelled?”

He looked at me with peering eyes.

While they had a gentle look to them, they also appeared to contain something else entirely.

“Not really.”

It may have been interpreted as an unfairly neutral statement, but it was my honest thoughts on the matter. Even though there were a few students up for consideration, nobody wanted to openly nominate one for expulsion. It would be better to determine who to expel with a class discussion instead.

“We have no choice but to come to terms with it, whoever it ends up being.”

“How level-headed. Compared to someone like me, you’re far more cut out to be the class leader.”

Hirata had taken the initiative to pull the class together earlier in the year, but his words were now filled with a timid uncertainty.

There was a single, specific thing he could do to prepare himself.

“What should I do moving forward? How exactly should I face this exam?”

It may be a little out of line to give him advice, but Hirata was always frequently helping those around him.

I wanted to do something to help him…

“I don’t want you to take my word for it, but I’ll tell you what I think.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s put idealistic thoughts about ‘*saving everyone*’ to the side for a moment. You’ve been racking your brain, asking yourself *‘Who should we get rid of?’* for a while now, but you still haven’t been able to come to a decision.”

My words were clearly troubling him a bit, but Hirata ultimately nodded his head in agreement.

“In which case, how about you try doing the opposite? Instead of thinking ‘*Who should we get rid of?’*, think ‘*Who should I save?*’ instead.”

“Who should I save…? Of course I want save everyo-”

“Attach a priority to each student in the class. Rank everyone, including yourself, one at a time from most to least important. Of course, there may be some students with roughly the same importance, but you should still try to do it anyway. You can make it simple and base it on who you like the most, or you could base it on how much they’ve contributed to the class so far.”

By drawing up a ranking like this, there would inevitably be a student in last place.

“That’s… But…”

It was an incredibly straightforward solution.

However, Hirata wouldn’t be able to do it. His heart was still stuck on saving everyone.

He probably thought ranking his classmates like this would be an act of foolishness.

“Let’s say I make a ranking. The list I come up with wouldn’t necessarily be the same as the one our classmates come up with.”

With this excuse, he continued to run away.

At this rate, the day of the special exam would arrive and he’d be completely defenceless.

“That’s fine. I think you should start by coming to your own decision first.”

For now, this was the only advice I could give him.

Moreover, whatever judgement he would make from here was up to him to decide on his own.

I took a grateful sip of the coffee he brewed for me.

It seemed to be from a different brand than the coffee I usually bought, as it had a somewhat potent bitterness to it.

“Well, yeah. You’re probably right… Recently I’ve been consumed by the desire to run away from all of this.”

Hirata took my advice and earnestly tried his best to come to terms with it.

It probably wouldn’t go smoothly right away. The idea may leave a bad taste in his mouth and end up being rejected completely.

However, he still tried his best to accept it with an open mind.

“Haa… Alright. Thank you.”

Hirata squeezed out words of appreciation.

For the time being, our conversation seemed to reach a stopping point.

“Can I ask something a bit insensitive?”

Suddenly changing the subject, I decided to try asking about something I was curious about.

“Hm? What’s up?”

“Has anyone confessed to you since your break-up with Karuizawa?”

“Well that’s an unexpected question. I never thought you’d be asking me something like that, Ayanokōji-kun.”

There was a mix of surprise and bewilderment on Hirata’s face.

I was interested in Hirata’s potential love interests because of my past conversation with our classmate, Mii-chan. Before the end-of-year exam, she had reached out to me for advice because she was interested in Hirata, so I was curious about what had happened with that. I found myself wondering if she had already taken action.

“Well, I won’t say who, but… yes, a girl has reached out to me.”

In other words, girls were already beginning to confess to Hirata.

Whether it was Mii-chan or not, I had no intention of pressing him any further to find out.

Regardless, attractive guys like Hirata really are incredible. Girls were constantly throwing themselves at him, even if he didn’t do anything. No, rather, Hirata’s popularity stemmed from the way he carried himself. He wasn’t slacking off in any way.

“Are you going out with this girl?”

“Certainly not. I’m not going to go out with anyone right now.”

He decisively asserted his stance on the matter.

“Is there someone you like already or something?”

I could understand where he was coming from if he only had eyes for the one his heart was set on.

“Dating someone… is just too much for me right now. I’m unqualified.”

“If that’s how it is for you, then it must be nothing more than a pipe dream for someone like me.”

In the first place, when it comes to falling in love, there’s no need for qualifications.

“I’m just not fit for love.”

The more capable the person, the more humble they are.

The less capable the person, the more arrogant they are

Ultimately, our conversation ended without either of us delving too much deeper.

Part 7

“Sorry for calling you out so late, Ichinose.”

That night, at a bit past eleven, I invited Ichinose over to my room.

It wouldn’t have been unusual for her to be on her guard and turn the offer down, but she didn’t seem to have any issues with it.

“It’s totally fine! Though, it’s quite rare for you to reach out to me like this.”

“It’s because I really wanted to talk to you. For the time being, if it’s alright with you, feel free to take a seat on the bed. The floor might be a bit cold.”

After expressing her gratitude, Ichinose sat down on the bed.

“This… My heart’s beating kinda fast…”

“Hm?”

“Oh. No, it’s nothing. How come we couldn’t talk over the phone?”

How come, huh?

I picked up a white cup as I set some water to boil in a kettle.

“I wanted to confirm a bunch of stuff with you that’s difficult to convey just by talking over the phone.”

“I see.”

“I suppose I’ll cut to the chase and ask you directly. What are you going to do about the exam?”

“Are you looking to continue this morning’s conversation? Well, I’ve been putting a lot of thought into how to overcome the exam without

anybody being expelled… I suppose.”

“And has anything specific come to mind?”

I took a look over my shoulder and watched as she tried to answer the question.

Of course, it was just something I had said for politeness’ sake.

We both knew that there was no other way to do it besides forking over twenty million private points.

“Uhm, not yet unfortunately… There’s already not much time left, so I’m getting a bit anxious.”

I couldn’t see any signs that she was hiding something based on her words or behavior. I was reminded that, back during the cruise ship special exam, I had been impressed with Ichinose’s unexpectedly adept poker face.

“I was thinking that you might go to president Nagumo for help.”

“What kind of help?”

If they aren’t properly prepared for it ahead of time, posing a question like this might cause the other person to become flustered, yet Ichinose still returned my question as if nothing revealing had been asked at all.

However, what I was about to say next would surely be enough to break her poker face.

As the water in the kettle began to boil, I prepared a cup of hot chocolate and handed it to her.

“Thank you.”

“This supplementary exam is different than the ones we’ve had before. It can’t be cleared without someone being forcibly expelled, with the sole exception being to save up twenty million private points. No matter how many points Class B has saved up, there’s no way you’ve reached twenty million. With that assumption in mind,

you would have no other choice but to seek assistance from a third party."

Ichinose eyes shifted to her hot chocolate, letting out small, steady breaths to cool it down.

"Is that so? Well, Asahina-senpai also knew about it. Though, I didn't think she'd tell you, Ayanokōji-kun."

She seemed to realize that there was no use in trying to hide it anymore, immediately making the connection as to how I knew what I did.

"Then, I'm guessing you've also heard about his condition for lending me the points we need?"

As I responded with a small nod, a bitter smile took shape on Ichinose's face.

"Isn't it just ridiculous? In so many ways…"

Lending out private points on the condition that she enters into a relationship.

Furthermore, she was seriously thinking about accepting this condition.

This was probably what she meant by 'In so many ways'.

"Nagumo-senpai more or less prohibited me from revealing anything about our deal. He told me that if I did, I can forget it ever existed in the first place. Though, since Asahina-senpai is the one who told you, I should probably be safe for the time being."

"Don't worry about that."

"You say that, but this doesn't have anything to do with you, right…?"

"True enough."

It was Class B's problem, and Ichinose's decision.

“How many more points do you need?”

“A little over four million.”

Just by entering into a relationship, the four million points her class needed would be accounted for and they could make it through the exam without anyone being expelled.

“Nagumo’s given you quite the condition.”

“Yeah. It’d usually be impossible for someone like me to borrow points and go out with Nagumo-senpai. Generally speaking, since he’s lending me the points, it only makes sense that he’s in a position to ask something of me in return.”

As I listened to her thoughts on the matter, I got an idea of what she was thinking. There was no way she’d allow someone to be expelled from Class B. For that very reason, she was preparing to sacrifice herself.

“It’s pretty much the only way to save everyone in Class B.”

“Is that so…?”

At this point, there was nothing I could say to help her.

Private points were the only thing physically capable of helping Ichinose right now.

Realistically, four million was a number that even I wouldn’t be able to acquire, no matter how hard I tried.

“Are… you worried about me?”

“I’m sorry if I’m being impertinent.”

“No at all. Rather, I’m super happy.”

Despite her response, her expression was still a bit clouded.

“But, I’m still kinda troubled honestly… I probably wouldn’t have wavered with my decision if I hadn’t spoken with you.”

Ichinose slowly took a sip of her hot chocolate.

“…So what do you think, Ayanokōji-kun?”

“About Nagumo’s deal?”

“Yep. From your perspective, what do you think about what I’m trying to do?”

Ichinose’s eyes locked onto mine.

I answered her, bearing the full weight of her expectations.

“It’s a method available to you and you alone that can prevent a classmate from being expelled. It’s available to you because you joined the student council and made connections with president Nagumo. Striking a deal with him to reach twenty million points is definitely one way to go about all of this.”

“You don’t look down on me for it?”

“There’s no need to look down on you. Though, to be completely honest, I’m not sure if it’s worth paying twenty million private points just to save a classmate.”

“…Is that so?”

Ichinose slowly took another sip of her hot chocolate.

“Say, Ayanokōji-kun.”

She continued to keep eye contact.

“Hmm?”

“Ayanokōji-kun, are you perhaps someone really amazing?”

For her to call me someone really amazing, I didn’t know how to react.

I had only told her exactly what I had heard from Asahina.

“What leads you to believe that I am? Sorry, but it’s not something

I'm personally aware of."

"It only makes you even more amazing if that's true. After all, you…"

She held back the words she was about to say.

"What is it?"

"No, nothing at all."

It was as if she didn't even fully understand what she wanted to say.

As if her mouth had been moving one step faster than her brain.

"…What is this, I wonder…?"

Ichinose quietly murmured, seemingly asking this question to herself.

Although it had been a bit forced, I was glad to hear about this from her in person.

I could see that, no matter what happens, Ichinose would act for the sake of Class B.

After all of this anxiety, Ichinose would probably come to a decision.

That is, to enter into a relationship with Nagumo Miyabi.

Chapter 4: Brother and Sister

Intro

It was the third morning after the supplemental exam was announced.

The vote was to be held on Saturday, the day after tomorrow.

All too soon, one person would be expelled from each class.

Cold air seeped into my body the moment I opened the door to the hallway.

After descending to the first-floor lobby in the elevator, I spotted Sudō walking out of the stairwell.

“You’re using the stairs?”

“Sorta. Even if it’s just a short one, I thought I’d get a workout in.”

From club activities to studying, Sudō was probably trying his best to lead a standard student lifestyle.

Just like that, the two of us headed off for school together.

“I may be stupid and short-tempered, but I’ve been making huge improvements recently. That’s why I absolutely don’t wanna be expelled.”

Instead of talking to me, it felt like more like he was talking to himself.

“Would it be wrong for me to say that you’re fine with being resented as long as you can stay enrolled here?”

“Nah, that sounds about right. The strong-willed are the ones who’ll make it through this exam.”

“Right.”

After arriving at school, I felt a strange sense of discomfort as soon as I walked in the classroom.

Sudō, on the other hand, went to his seat without noticing anything.

The mood had changed.

I was by no means insensitive to things like this either.

The moment I stepped into Class C, I noticed a completely different feel to the classroom compared to the day before.

The usual, everyday classroom scene was playing out right before my eyes.

Everyone was acting as if things were totally normal.

The room was immersed in idle chatter and standard friendly conversation.

It was the physical incarnation of *something being out of place*.

Just yesterday, everyone had been very cautious of each other, expecting to be kept in check by the people around them.

And yet, today, there was a strange sense of unity.

“Good morning Ayanokōji-kun.”

Hirata called out to me.

“Morning.”

After a short reply, I took a moment to examine how Hirata was taking in all of this.

“Hm? Is something wrong?”

I wondered if he didn’t notice anything strange about the room, or if he just pretended not to.

Hirata looked into my eyes with the same expression as always.

“No, it’s nothing.”

“Really? Well, let’s have a good day today as well.”

Hirata finished his greeting and made his way to the girls who were calling for him.

The strange feeling that something was out of place gradually faded as more and more students arrived in the classroom.

The conclusion I drew from this was that a large group had probably been formed in preparation for the upcoming exam.

There had probably been a consensus on choosing not only who to protect, but who to kick out as well.

There were eleven people in the classroom. Hirata aside, if the remaining ten combined their censure votes, it’d put whoever they targeted in a dangerous position.

Out of these ten people, there were a handful of boys in a group with Ike and Yamauchi.

There was also a group of girls that usually had little to do with them.

It was possible that everyone in the classroom had united into a large group.

Though, strangely enough, some of the girls were members of the group Kei was in.

What’s more, I still hadn’t heard anything about this from Kei yet.

“Good morning.”

Horikita showed up before long.

Although her attitude was the same as usual, she did a quick look around the classroom.

“…What happened?”

“You feel it too?”

“Yes. It’s a little unpleasant. Though, if you’re interested, why don’t you go and ask them yourself?”

“I’ll pass. It’s better to let sleeping dogs lie.”

At the very least, it wasn’t something you could just carelessly look into.

[Has something happened?]

I sent a message to Keisei, who had arrived at school earlier in the morning.

[No idea. But I feel like something’s different from yesterday for some reason.]

Keisei didn’t seem to have caught on entirely, but he was on the right track.

[Maybe a large group was formed. Our classmates are weirdly calm.]

I sent a message to point him in the right direction.

After he read it, Keisei looked around the room and then at me.

[That’s certainly true. The gloomy atmosphere is clearly gone. Good job noticing it.]

[I don’t have many friends, so I’m sensitive to changes in my surroundings.]

[Assuming a group of ten or more people has been formed, they’ve probably decided on who they’re going to vote for, right?]

[The person they’ll be targeting will be in a pretty tough spot.]

[That makes me wonder who formed the group… Will we be okay?]

I could feel Keisei’s anxiety from his message.

As the number of people in a group increases, in order to increase the

overall sway, students who aren't very close to the original members would inevitably end up joining. Leading a group like that isn't an easy thing to do.

Since more people had arrived in the classroom, I stopped messaging Keisei for the time being.

The continuation of this would have to wait until lunch or until after school.

Part 1

Lunchtime. I joined up with the Ayanokōji Group for some small talk.

Although it was just small talk, the majority of the conversation had to do with the supplementary exam.

Naturally, the first topic was the unusual atmosphere in the classroom that morning.

Since Keisei had been the one to head to school early today, it started off with him telling the rest of us about how there were signs that a large group had formed.

"…I see. You're right that it did kinda feel more cheerful today than yesterday."

"But… It's still just speculation at this point… Right?"

"Yeah. There's no evidence that a large group has really formed, and it's possible they haven't chosen a specific target for their censure votes either."

In the end, this conjecture was solely based on what had taken place earlier in the morning.

"So, who should we try looking into first?"

"That's a tough question. If we choose the wrong person, the leader of the group might figure out that we're snooping around. If that happens, there's a risk that one of us may be targeted as well."

Keisei mentioned the one thing we wanted to avoid at all costs.

"There's probably a reason why we weren't invited."

When it comes to a large group, it would be fine to invite anyone other than the group's primary target.

It would be ideal for 39 people to corner a single person.

However, this outcome simply isn't realistic.

"What if… one of us is really close with whoever they're targeting?"

Haruka suggested, quietly, mischievously looking between each of us.

"…Or… what if one of us is the target…"

"S-stop it Haruka-chan…!"

Airi's fear aside, Haruka's joke wasn't exactly a laughing matter.

"It's possible that they moved to make a group on the very first day and slowly increased the number of people they could trust from there. Then, today, they probably felt that it was fine to come out of the shadows."

Keisei's deduction was reasonable. The change was quite a lot for a single day. In all likelihood, this group had been taking action ever since the supplemental exam was announced.

"If they still plan on increasing their numbers, then they might get into contact with one of us today."

"What if they intend to target one of us? What are we supposed to do if they threaten to have us expelled if we don't cooperate with them and work against each other…?"

Akito inadvertently asked one of the big questions.

"Isn't it super obvious? We've already decided to prioritize each other."

"Even if… you become their target as a result, Haruka?"

"That's… but… I don't think I want to stay in school so badly that I'd betray my friends. If they did something like that, I'd probably complain."

A little timid, Haruka responded to Akito's question.

“Same here. I’d absolutely never betray any of you.”

Despite her anxiety, Airi nodded earnestly.

“How about you Keisei?”

After a short pause, Keisei spoke his honest feelings.

“…I pretty much agree with you two. However, reality is never that simple. In this exam, if you really get targeted, you probably won’t be able to avoid it. It may sound better to take an expulsion in place of a friend, but… it would still be really painful.”

“That’s… Kiyopon, what do you think?”

Everyone turned and looked at me.

I felt as though, to a certain extent, I should attempt to unify everyone’s ideas.

“I’m against Haruka’s way of doing things here.”

“That… Are you saying you’d betray us in order to get along with the large group!?”

“No, cooperating with another group to kick out a friend is completely out of the question. However, it would be better to go along with them on the surface. I don’t think it’d be a good idea to be uncooperative or speak out against them.”

It’s vital to avoid letting your emotions cloud your judgement in these situations.

“By pretending to cooperate with them, we can figure out how many censure votes they already have and who they intend to invite into the group moving forward. This information would be important to get our hands on, right?”

“…Certainly.”

Haruka, who had been getting riled up, began to regain her composure.

If you got riled up and turned down the large group's offer, you wouldn't be able to get very much information.

At this point, we had no way of knowing who they were targeting.

"Even if you just pretend to cooperate with them, it's not possible for them to find out who voted for who on the day of the vote since it's anonymous."

In other words, we would be able to obscure what would actually take place.

"I guess that doing things your way really would be best for all of us."

I nodded along in agreement.

"Additionally, the large group has been quietly expanding its influence since day one and have a sizable following already. The mastermind behind it is probably quite sharp in their own way. They've been handling themselves quite carefully, and furthermore, they haven't specified anything about who they're going to expel. It doesn't seem like Hirata and Horikita have noticed them either."

Horikita may have had an idea, but Hirata hadn't seemed to notice anything at all.

I had expected Hirata to take notice, yet surprisingly, it still managed to elude him, even during such a critical moment.

"Hirata probably isn't being held down by a specific group because he views everyone from a neutral position. If they carelessly asked him for support, there's a chance he might try to make the group disband instead."

"In any case, you could say that the person behind all of this really thought everything through."

"You're amazing Kiyotaka-kun. I can't believe you were able to come up with all of this!"

Airi clapped her hands happily, sort of as though she was

congratulating herself.

“That’s certainly true. I wasn’t the one who noticed the strange mood this morning, Kiyotaka was.”

“I said it before. When you’re by yourself for a long time, you just unintentionally pick up on the small details. Moreover, there’s no guarantee that this large group actually exists, it’s nothing more than an assumption.”

There was no evidence as to whether it actually existed or not. This was just to push the conversation forward.

“Still, I think it’s best to be on guard.”

“Man, everything we’ve been talking about has been such a drag. Can’t we talk about something a bit more positive?”

With a sigh, Akito spoke up as he fiddled with his cell phone.

Everyone shook their heads.

“Talking about something positive simply isn’t possible. The reality is that we’re going to lose a classmate soon, so even if we did, it wouldn’t be very enjoyable.”

These feelings of anxiety would continue to smoulder, regardless of how much we planned things out here.

“When you put it that way, I… I really am pretty worried…”

“You’re still saying stuff like that Airi? You’ll definitely be fine.”

In order to stop her from worrying, Haruka spoke up and gently patted Airi on the head.

“But…”

“Between the two of us, girls hate me, like, way more than they hate you.”

“Maybe so…”

When Akito nodded in agreement, Haruka fiercely glared at him. He spoke up to defend himself.

“What? You said it yourself.”

“It’s fine for me to say it, but don’t you think it’d be annoying to hear it from someone else?”

“…I guess.”

Faced with such a sound argument, Akito gave in.

Seeing them like this, Airi seemed to lose even more of her self-confidence.

“Haruka-chan… You’re cute… You have a good sense of humour… and you’re smart…”

“No no… At the very least, you shouldn’t be saying that first bit.”

Although Haruka was somewhat surprised, she still consoled Airi.

“There’s no need for you girls to worry so much. There are far too many better targets among the guys.”

Keisei also followed-up with words of reassurance.

“Yeah, the boys are the ones in real danger, so there’s no reason to be so serious right now.”

“Really, compared to the girls- Hey, isn’t that Hirata-kun?”

Haruka’s question sounded somewhat doubtful. The rest of us followed her line of sight.

Sure enough, there was Hirata, walking listlessly all by himself.

He was the type of guy who would always hold his head up high and never stopped smiling.

Now, however, it wouldn’t be accurate to say he gave off a cheerful impression, not even as flattery.

“What did you expect? He’s probably worried about the exam.”

“Looks like it. Kinda like he’s a totally different person.”

The two of them worriedly watched as Hirata disappeared from view.

“He looks so distraught even though he doesn’t have to worry about getting expelled. He’s placing way too much of a burden on himself.”

“Someone’s going to be expelled. It’s unavoidable.”

It felt like, in some respects, they were looking at Hirata with pity in their eyes.

I received a text message as I listened to their conversation.

The sender didn’t seem to be someone I’d be able to disregard.

“Sorry, I’m being asked to meet up with someone.”

“Who by?”

This seemed to spurn Haruka’s interest, as she shifted her gaze toward me with intrigue in her eyes.

Airi looked at me as well, eyes filled with anxiety.

“…Horikita. It’s probably about the exam.”

“Oh. Cool.”

Haruka lost all interest after hearing the details.

She probably recalled Horikita’s interaction with Ryūen not too long ago.

After seeing them off, I left the cafe.

Part 2

The meeting spot was a rest area along the pathway to and from school, unsuitable for meeting up during lunch break.

Nobody liked coming out here around this time of year, especially during spring and autumn.

“Sorry for calling you out here.”

“It’s nothing. Sorry for making you wait in such terrible weather.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

The person I was meeting with was Horikita.

However, it wasn’t the younger Suzune, but rather the elder Manabu.

“…Greetings.”

Tachibana bowed her head slightly.

Despite both of them having left the student council, Tachibana still continued to stay beside the elder Horikita.

It went without saying that their relationship seemed to go beyond that of a mere boss and subordinate.

Tachibana usually tended to be a little abrasive with me, but today she seemed somewhat reserved.

I wondered if it was because she had previously fallen into Nagumo’s trap and had forced Class A to take action to prevent her expulsion.

“I hear a supplemental special exam has begun.”

“News travels fast. Well, it’ll be over soon enough.”

“A few first-years have already come to consult the matter with us

third-years. Though, there probably aren't any of us who'll be able to help in any meaningful way."

"As expected, there aren't any upperclassmen willing to lend out their private points?"

"It would be difficult. The same special exams are being carried out every year, but it's effectively on a set three-year rotation. This is in order to prevent currently enrolled students from leaking any exam information."

It was just as I had suspected, although it was fairly obvious.

"The special exam given to the third-years will probably be decided by the number of private points we have. We don't have enough to leave any behind for our underclassmen."

I see. This was probably the reason why Tachibana's complexion didn't look very good.

Because of her mistake, her class was forced to hand over 20 million points.

Her reaction was understandable considering that those points would have been important for overcoming their own special exam.

"I'm so sorry. If only I were more reliable…"

Driven by her guilty conscience, Tachibana proceeded to lower her head to the elder Horikita.

"You're doing something unnecessary."

"Ah, y-yes…"

He proceeded to scold her. I wondered how many times she had already apologized to him.

"Have you heard from your little sister?"

"Suzune isn't going to approach me."

“This special exam has been unprecedented. There needs to be someone willing to advise her.”

In reality, Horikita was desperate. This was clear enough given her recent contact with Ryūen.

Instead of getting anything out of him, Ryūen had shut her down completely.

“If that’s the case, wouldn’t it be fine for that someone to be you, Ayanokōji?”

“You’re asking for the impossible. Horikita and I are far too different.”

“So you’re saying that she and I are similar?”

“At least more so than me.”

“…”

There was a moment of silence before I spoke up again.

“She’s expected to make the tough decisions from now on, whether she wants to or not. You’re the only one who can guide her.”

“Even if that’s true, that’s something she’ll have to decide on her own.”

He wasn’t wrong. He shouldn’t force his younger sister to come to a decision.

Everything would ultimately have to be judged and decided by Horikita Suzune herself.

“So, what exactly did you call me out here for?”

Having a deep, long conversation in this cold weather wasn’t preferable for any of us.

Since he wasn’t fond of talking about his younger sister, I thought I’d move on to another topic.

“It’s about Nagumo. I wanted to know if you’ve noticed him make any unusual movements.”

“Is that really something we had to talk about in person?”

“Actually, I’m the one who asked for it.”

In an unexpected way, I found out the reason why this meeting had been arranged.

“I want to know why you’ve been acknowledged.”

I could see traces of frustration in Tachibana’s eyes.

Whatever the reason, the elder Horikita had accepted her request to set up a meeting with me here, so he was probably interested in helping her mature.

“I’ve been acknowledged? He’s probably never thought of me as anything but disrespectful.”

“I know that.”

Hearing such a clear, decisive answer from her stung my heart a bit.

“Still… I’ve decided to try broadening my horizons at least a little. You may have potential worth recognizing that I’m just not able to see.”

“What’s your impression after meeting with Ayanokōji once again?”

“Honestly, I don’t have the slightest idea.”

“I thought you’d say that.”

I found myself perplexed by their conversation.

Perhaps because of the strange, yet somewhat relaxing atmosphere, the elder Horikita let himself show a slight smile.

“It’s a shame that we’ll only know Ayanokōji’s true value after we’ve already graduated.”

“No, nothing will change, even after you two graduate.”

“I think so too.”

Tachibana gave her thoughts as well, agreeing with me.

They had called me out into such cold weather just for this.

Well, I suppose this was also a testament to how large the wound Tachibana has been carrying actually was.

I spoke up again.

“Nagumo hasn’t shown any interest in me because of his obsession with you. If you want him dealt with, you might as well face him head-on, just this once.”

This wasn’t the type of request I should be making of a man about to graduate from Class A.

It was just that, one way or another, Nagumo would surely make his move.

No, it was entirely possible that he already has.

“…Nagumo-kun has been in close contact with the third-year’s Class B recently. I think he’s going to offer them his complete support, just like he did at the training camp.”

For the sake of defeating his long-term rival, Nagumo may have offered to help demote Horikita Manabu and his class down to Class B.

“There’s always something else. I just want to pass the time in peace.”

“If you really want to do that moving forward, this problem with Nagumo… You can’t afford to neglect it like this.”

The elder Horikita was confident that something terrible was going to take place next year.

After Horikita Manabu takes his leave and there's no longer anyone he's obsessed with defeating, Nagumo would start to act violently, doing whatever he pleased.

That is to say, I would suffer greatly if I didn't take the necessary countermeasures by then.

"I'll do what I can."

I gave him this answer for the time being.

Part 3

That evening, after I had gotten out of the shower, I checked my phone only to see that I had several missed calls from Kei.

It seemed to be something urgent, given that she had called nearly every other minute.

Having barely finished drying my hair, I began to dial her number to call her back, but I was met with yet another call from her, so I simply answered that instead.

“Hello?”

“Jeez, finally you pick up…!”

“You seem awfully panicked.”

“No duh I’m panicked… Like, something absolutely terrible’s happened Kiyotaka.”

“Something terrible?”

“I have no idea who’s behind it, but Kiyotaka… everyone’s gonna vote you out of school.”

“Is that so?”

“That… does that mean you already knew?”

“No, this is the first I’ve heard of it. Though, I was vaguely aware that somebody was being targeted.”

The fact that this somebody was me was something I had only just now found out about.

“Why are you still so calm?”

“Do you know how many people are going to vote against me?”

“I dunno exactly… But, from the feel of it, it’s prolly already around half the class. They kinda threatened that if anyone told you about it, that person would be the one getting expelled next time.”

Since they were trying to drive me into a corner, it was only natural that there’d be a couple of threats getting tossed around.

I wondered if they had already managed to convince the majority of the class.

If they had, even with the praise votes from the Ayanokōji Group and the one I’d get from Kei, it would all still be just a drop in the bucket.

“Are you okay to tell me this, then? You could end up being targeted yourself.”

Of course, that would only be if I went around telling everyone I had heard about it from Kei.

I didn’t know who was behind it, but they had done a good job. Although the strategy of singling someone out and forcing their expulsion was, in and of itself, simple, gathering the votes needed to actually make it happen was not. After all, somebody who singles out a classmate would be seen as ‘evil’ by the people around them. If someone with a strong sense of justice or a close friend of the target was to find out about the plan, it’d be possible for the mastermind to be forced out of school instead. While there’d be resistance when it comes to judging a classmate, there’d be far less resistance when it comes to judging ‘evil’. This was the exact reason why Haruka and Akito, who are both relatively sharp-tongued students in their own right, wouldn’t take the initiative and nominate someone to expel during our group conversations. Ultimately, our entire group discussed the candidates and came to a joint decision about who to vote for moving forward.

The mastermind targeting me wasn’t afraid of becoming a target themselves.

“You’re gonna do something, right? Like, you can do something

about it, right?"

"I wonder. It's troublesome if half the class is against me."

Even if I managed to gather ten praise votes, it wouldn't necessarily mean I'd be able to escape from such a tough situation.

The mastermind's group would obviously distribute their own praise votes amongst their friends.

I was facing a significant risk of being expelled.

"Thanks for letting me know this."

"It's no big deal or anything, but… For real, what're you gonna do?"

"What will I do? I'll have to think about it for a bit."

"You may seem perfect, but even you have flaws okay? If I wasn't here, isn't it totally possible you could've been expelled without noticing anything?"

"That's exactly why you're here."

"Oh. I see…"

It was exactly because I had someone capable of obtaining information out of my reach that I was able to find out about this expulsion crisis.

"I'll contact you again soon."

"Gotcha."

I ended the call.

While I wanted to talk a little bit about March 8th next week, I dropped the matter for now.

Before anything else, I needed to find out why I was being targeted.

"Well then…"

I grasped my phone tightly and slowly started racking my brain.

Who I chose to contact here would greatly influence my strategy moving forward.

Contacting the mastermind or one of their followers was simply not an option.

That being said, the situation wouldn't improve at all if I reached out to someone useless either.

"…In which case."

I promptly dialed a number directly from my contact list.

I decided that, first of all, I should finish what I needed to do.

After a while, the call connected.

"What is it?"

Answering the phone with his ever-unchanging tone of voice was Horikita Manabu.

"I need to talk to you about the supplemental exam. It's fairly important."

"Wait a moment."

I heard the sound of running water from the other end of the call and waited for around ten seconds.

"I was doing the dishes. I didn't want the noise to interfere over the speaker."

"Sorry for interrupting you."

"So, something bad has happened."

The elder Horikita and I had met up earlier in the day.

He probably understood that something bad had happened because I hadn't mentioned anything back then.

“Something happened in my class. A large group was formed and they’ve decided on who exactly they’ll be trying to expel.”

“Given the exam, the establishment of a large group is inevitable. Who’s being targeted?”

Perhaps the face of his younger sister had come to mind.

“Me.”

“That’s not a funny joke.”

“I’m not joking. More than half of my class has already agreed to vote against me.”

“Oh?”

“I’m in a tough spot, so I thought I’d consult with you about it.”

“Even you can’t do anything about this exam? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Put simply, yes.”

Though, to be precise, I was talking to him because I was trying to do something.

“What do you want from me? When it comes to this exam of yours, I don’t think there’s anything I can do to help you.”

“Well, there’s only one thing I want from you.”

I offered him a proposal. My path moving forward would depend on whether he accepted it or not.

“…I see. So that’s what you want.”

“As far as you’re concerned, it shouldn’t be a bad offer. You can use it as your reason.”

“Indeed. I wouldn’t have agreed if that were not the case.”

“You also don’t need to exert your authority as the former student

council president, nor do anything to help me directly."

A capable student like the elder Horikita should be able to understand what I'm getting at, even without me explicitly stating my intentions.

"You were probably going to use this strategy of yours regardless of whether you got targeted or not."

"Yeah. I had planned on getting in touch with you anyway. I would've brought it up earlier today, but…"

"You didn't because Tachibana was there?"

Of course, I knew she wasn't the kind of student to go and let out a secret, but I refrained from saying anything, just in case.

"'I'm in a tough spot' you say. You aren't in a tough spot at all."

"That depends on tomorrow. Without your cooperation, I'd have been forced to change tactics, and you should be well aware that it's not beneficial for me to take center stage."

"…Alright. We'll act tomorrow."

"You've saved me a lot of trouble. I'll get in touch with you when I identify the mastermind."

I cut the call with the elder Horikita and plugged the charging cord into my cell phone.

"Now that I have that out of the way…"

It was a strategy I'd been planning on carrying out for this exam since it was first announced.

A necessary action to remove an unnecessary student.

However, in the case where I ended up becoming the target, it was vital that I raise the accuracy of said strategy. I decided to call Kushida next.

“Good evening, Ayanokōji-kun. I somehow thought I’d be getting a call from you today.”

“I assume you have a grasp of the situation, then?”

“Yep. Looks like you’re in quite the pinch.”

As expected, the news that I had become an expulsion candidate had already reached Kushida’s ears.

“Oh don’t tell me that you wanted me to clue you in just because of our cooperative relationship, okay? If I leaked any information to you, I’d be the one being targeted next time, after all～”

Of course, this probably wasn’t her real reason for not telling me.

“Who did you hear about it from? That you’re being targeted.”

Kushida’s interests lay in finding out who told me I was being targeted.

“They were anonymous.”

“Hmph. Then at least tell me one thing. What did this anonymous person tell you?”

What did they say, huh?

I stayed silent since I had no intention of answering that question.

“You’re quite the smart one, aren’t cha Ayanokōji-kun? You’re probably thinking you should be careful to avoid saying anything important.”

“Whatever you’re getting at is going over my head. What do you want to know?”

“For example, did they tell you who the mastermind is? Or around how many votes there are against you?”

This meant Kushida wanted to know the finer details of what Kei had told me. If she told Kei that half the class had agreed to vote for me

and told other students the number was one third, she'd be able to narrow down who had leaked the information.

"It seems we're both trying to read into each other's intentions."

"Could it be that you're the mastermind, Kushida?"

"Oh I wouldn't do something like that. I'll have you know that, in our class, I'm a symbol of complete neutrality and peace."

However, even if she wasn't the mastermind, she had to at least be close to them. I moved on.

"That's true. It wouldn't be surprising for you to target Horikita if you were the one behind all this."

"Ahaha, fair enough. You knew full well that it was risky to reach out to me like this, yet you went ahead and contacted me anyway. I know you're in quite the pickle, but… What do you want from me?"

"I want to know who the mastermind is."

"Even if you knew now, it wouldn't help you, would it?"

Kushida was the type to always adapt to the situation at hand, so it didn't seem hard to win her over to my side.

"Please tell me."

"You're quite upfront, aren't you Ayanokōji-kun? However, I can't just betray my friends… Heh."

Kushida let slip a little devilish laugh from the other end of the phone.

"No, it might be more accurate to say I couldn't tell you even if I wanted to."

"Meaning?"

"I regret to have to inform you this, but I'm the only one who knows who the mastermind is."

“…I see.”

“Indeed. You seem to understand what this means.”

The mastermind had selected Kushida as their primary confidant.

Then, with her help, they picked out people who had no connection to me and recruited them into the group.

Given the abundant amount of trust she had with the class, it would probably be difficult for them to turn her invitation down.

“If it’s you, you’ll be able to find out who it is sooner or later, right? So, even if I don’t tell you now, it wouldn’t make too much of a difference.”

“No. It’ll probably be difficult if I don’t hear it from you. I’m guessing that this person also wants to try and stay hidden. Isn’t that why they’ve gone and entrusted everything to you?”

“You sure do speak your mind, don’t you?”

“That’s because, knowing you, you’d probably manage to see through any plans I have if I didn’t.”

I had a hunch that my plan to find out about the mastermind would be a success if I went to Kushida.

Though, at the same time, it had also been a failure.

“I’m surprised you decided to participate in getting someone expelled from school.”

“Well, kinda. I’ve been put into a rather difficult situation too, you know? If I turned them down, they’d think I wasn’t willing to help, you know? I’d be troubled if a rumor was spread claiming I was being uncooperative, even though they’re the one who reached out to me.”

She was definitely in a situation that called for thorough consideration.

“Though, deciding to take action was also difficult. I don’t want you

to drop out Ayanokōji-kun, but I can't just betray the trust of a student who's asked for help. What's more, I think they've grabbed hold of this weakness of mine a little bit. If they have, it seems like I might get targeted if I do anything to betray them."

Perhaps someone like Kushida would be able to maintain neutrality until the very end.

But even so, I was bothered by the fact that she was deliberately cooperating with them.

One explanation was that she's going along with it to protect herself. If she tactlessly refused the mastermind's offer, there was a real possibility that she wouldn't have been allowed to join the group. Alternatively, there was also the possibility that she would be resented, suffering as a result. That being the case, it was better for her to be in a position of control within the group instead, even if it meant taking a bit of a risk. This explanation was valid enough.

The girl named Kushida personifies pride and self-importance. Despite that, she's worshipped and praised by others, preferring to rule over them. She was the type to feel delighted about people being inferior to her.

"So, do you understand the situation I'm in? I couldn't help you even if I wanted to."

If the mastermind's identity were to be exposed, the blame would end up falling on Kushida.

She was being manipulated brilliantly.

"In that case, I won't try to force anything out of you. Sorry for calling so late at night."

"Really? You're not gonna ask anything?"

"I don't want to trouble you. It doesn't seem like you'll be able to help at all this time."

"Do you really think you can figure out who the mastermind is without me?"

“No idea. I’m not confident I can.”

I started backing off and showed a hint of weakness, enticing Kushida to take a few steps forward.

If she didn’t take the bait, there was nothing I could do about it. Either way, the identity of the mastermind was completely unrelated to my strategy. The knowledge would simply make the steps I’d have to take a little easier.

“What to do…”

But, rather than backing off, Kushida came to a stop.

She had taken the bait of her own accord.

“Well, Ayanokōji-kun is my comrade. I suppose I’ll tell you.”

With that, I stopped backing off as well.

“…Why did you change your mind?”

“Because I want to see how you’ll handle it, or something like that. That said, if any of this ends up falling back on me, I won’t forgive you. Are we on the same page?”

“I’m capable of distinguishing who I should and shouldn’t be making an enemy of.”

As I said this, I had a feeling that there was a slight smile forming on the edges of her mouth.

“It’s Yamauchi-kun.”

She gave the tentative name of the mastermind.

It was ‘tentative’ because there wasn’t enough evidence to determine whether he was or not.

“Yamauchi, huh?”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“He’s a reasonable expulsion candidate. It’s not surprising that he’d take the initiative and make a move to protect himself.”

“…Are you satisfied now?”

She asked inquisitively.

“Even after hearing this, there’s still something I don’t quite understand. I don’t think you’re stupid enough to be manipulated by someone like Yamauchi. I’m sure you could’ve successfully placated him and refused when he reached out to you. You’re putting yourself at a lot of risk by covering up for him and acting as his mediator.”

“Then, why didn’t I just turn him down, I wonder?”

“Perhaps you found out that the real mastermind isn’t Yamauchi, but the student backing him up from behind-the-scenes instead.”

Kushida had seemed to be enjoying herself, but now her tone became serious.

“You knew.”

“If I’m not mistaken, Sakayanagi approached Yamauchi not too long ago.”

Just before the end-of-year exam, she had come and paid Yamauchi a visit. It had been quite the hot topic within Class C at the time.

I presented Kushida with convincing enough reason for why I knew this, my previous direct contact with Sakayanagi aside.

“It’s surprising, but, yes, that’s exactly what’s going on. Sakayanagi-san from Class A seems to be the one supporting Yamauchi-kun. I’d like to avoid making an enemy out of her if at all possible.”

“How do you know that Sakayanagi is the one supporting him? Did Yamauchi tell you?”

“No, Yamauchi-kun’s been keeping it secret. But, you’re aware of the breadth of my information network, right? I found out about it from somebody in Class A. That is, that Sakayanagi-san’s manipulating him in order to try and do something to Class C.”

Everything was unfolding all too perfectly. Given the situation, the fact that Yamauchi reached out to Kushida first was probably also a part of Sakayanagi’s instructions. Within Class A, Hashimoto held suspicions about my relationship with Kei. It wouldn’t have been hard for him to warn Sakayanagi if their goal was to establish a group without tipping me off.

In which case, Kei shouldn’t have been invited into the group at all. I probably wouldn’t have noticed I was being targeted until later on.

“Is it a coincidence that you’re being targeted by Sakayanagi? Or is it intentional?”

“Who knows. I haven’t interacted with her very much. Maybe she’s just targeting someone who doesn’t stand out.”

“Well, that is possible. After all, other than Horikita-san, Sudō-kun, Satō-san, and your friends in that group of yours, there’s probably not anybody willing to take the risk to tell you about your situation.”

Despite all of this, it was unusual that the mastermind was Sakayanagi.

Why had she approached me and asked to postpone our face-off until the next special exam?

Did she really want to defeat me so badly that she was willing to break our agreement?

She had to be well aware that I’d refuse to compete against her during the next special exam if she started anything against me. Having Yamauchi gather censure votes against me was, without a doubt, a violation of our agreement. In other words, if I had to force some sort of meaning out of this, it would be that our agreement itself had been nothing but a lie.

Saying that our competition would be postponed until next time had

just been a distraction from her trap.

No… From what I knew of Sakayanagi, she wasn't the type of person who'd be satisfied with winning that way.

In which case, what should I make of all this?

"You've been a great help, Kushida."

"Be careful how you conduct yourself and make sure not to get expelled!"

I ended the call and tossed my phone onto my bed.

"No matter what they've got in store for me, what I have to do still hasn't changed."

Now that I knew the identity of the mastermind, all I had to do was relay the information to the elder Horikita and get the ball rolling.

Chapter 5: Good and Evil

Introduction

As I walked into class the next morning, most of the students in the room turned and looked in my direction.

However, they averted their gazes almost immediately.

Then, out of nowhere, they looked at me again. This proceeded to happen over and over.

The reality was that they had already begun taking action to expel me.

This was the true form of the out-of-place feeling I had experienced the day before.

The members of the Ayanokōji Group, such as Akito and Keisei, didn't seem to notice anything unusual.

In all likelihood, none of them had the skills necessary to act like they hadn't found out who the large group was targeting.

Furthermore, our opponents had done a lot of work to carefully construct such a large group, so there was effectively no chance the information leaked out to any of them.

I also wasn't willing to make them worry about me excessively by telling them the reality of the situation myself.

If I revealed my current situation to them carelessly, Kei's involvement in leaking the information to me may end up being made public.

I had no choice but to deal with this on my own.

"Good morning, Ayanokōji-kun."

"Ah. Good morning."

Having just arrived in the classroom herself, Horikita didn't appear to

be aware of the situation either.

“Yo!”

Sudō seemed to arrive together with her, as their greetings came nearly one right after the other.

“Just so you know, the timing of our arrivals was just a coincidence.”

“I wasn’t asking.”

For some reason or another, Sudō sent me an ostentatious look before heading over to his own seat.

He probably wasn’t involved with what was taking place within Class C.

While it is possible that he’d like to see me expelled, if he went along with Yamauchi’s plan, it’d have a large impact on Horikita’s evaluation of him afterward. Besides, he wasn’t a skilled enough actor to maintain a poker face either.

“…By the way.”

Horikita whispered to me after Sudō was out of earshot.

“What?”

“What did you do?”

“Aren’t you leaving out some details? Be more specific.”

“Regarding me. What did you do?”

Her question was still fairly abstract.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say, but I didn’t do anything. I don’t have the time to spend looking after you.”

“You don’t have the time? What are you getting at?”

“It’s my own problem. Don’t worry about it.”

Class was going to start soon.

Based on Horikita's attitude, she still hadn't gotten in contact with her older brother yet.

It was probably going to take place later this afternoon.

Part 1

It was lunch break on Friday and tomorrow's special exam was rapidly approaching.

I, Horikita Suzune, thought back on the events that had taken place the night before.

Just as I was thinking it was about time to go to bed, I received a text message.

I remember my heart nearly skipping a beat when I saw who it was from.

It was a message from my older brother.

He had only written a single line of text.

[Is there anything you regret?]

This single message that seemed to be asking me a question.

After reading it several times over, I thought about what I could do despite having lost my way.

However, this was a once in a lifetime opportunity.

If I let it get away from me… The next time I'd be able to hear my brother's voice would be during graduation.

[Would you be willing to talk with me?]

Having made up my mind, I wrote out this message in response.

Even though all I had to do was hit send, my fingers were heavy and

I couldn't easily bring myself to do it.

"Haa…"

I stabilized my breathing and pressed the button. The only thing I could do now was wait for my brother's response.

Around the time when my anxiety over whether or not he would reply had almost faded, a response came back in the form of a phone call.

Instead of anxiety, I felt relief.

Fortunately, he had responded with a phone call. It would've been hard for me to message him back with my trembling hands.

"…It's me. Suzune."

"You said you wanted to talk?"

"Yes…"

"What did you want to talk about?"

"…Uh, your message… Why did you send me it…"

"Is that really important right now? Is this really what you needed to talk to me about over the phone?"

"N-no that's not it."

Feeling like he was about to end the call, I quickly, frantically denied it to stop him from doing so.

"If it's okay with you… would you be willing to meet with me in person?"

"In person?"

"Y-yes."

"When you first enrolled here, I suggested that it would be better for you to drop out. The moment you rejected my offer, your relationship

with me was over. You do understand that, don't you?"

He brought up the cold, hard facts of the matter. I could only imagine his decision to contact me like this as nothing more than a whim.

The relationship we had as siblings was simply that distant.

Truthfully, I wanted to talk to my older brother about all sorts of things.

About everything that had happened so far. About what would happen in the future.

But… he would never ask me for something like that.

"It's something I want to ask you about in person."

He was silent. I slowly continued to speak.

"This will be the last time… After this, I will not involve myself with you ever again."

It was the only thing I could offer him.

"Alright, I understand."

That was the conversation that took place last night.

I was now heading out to meet my older brother.

To avoid being seen by others, we arranged to meet at the special building, a place usually devoid of other people.

By the time I arrived at my destination, he was already there.

Part 2

“Sorry to keep you waiting…”

Manabu stood there quietly. From Suzune’s perspective, he hadn’t changed a bit since they were younger.

He was still the same person she had been chasing after all this time.

“How long has it been since the two of us talked alone like this?”

“…If we don’t count what happened immediately after I enrolled here, about three years…”

“I see. It has probably been around that long.”

Manabu thought back to when his younger sister was in her first year of middle school.

When he decided to attend Kōdo Ikusei high school, he pushed her away.

At the time, he had never even considered that his younger sister would follow in his footsteps.

But, sure as day, Suzune was here now, standing in front of him.

“You said that you wanted to talk with me, so let’s hear it.”

Their conversation would be over if she said that her goal was to reconcile with her older brother.

If it was the old her, it wouldn’t have been surprising for her to say that.

In which case, Manabu probably wouldn’t say a word. He’d simply take his leave without a moment’s hesitation.

“It has to do with this supplementary exam. You’re aware of what the first-years are going through, right?”

“Mhm. Each class is being forced to expel one student.”

“Yes.”

“And?”

He urged Suzune to get on with it.

Suzune, who had been speaking relatively easily, hesitated to continue.

“If you’re asking about my own personal supply of private points, it was nearly exhausted back during the training camp. In which case, you’re just wasting your time.”

“It’s nothing like that. I had never considered asking you for that kind of support.”

Suzune hardened her resolve, determined to dispel any uncertainties he might have.

“What I wanted to talk with you about today… Please, give me courage.”

The words came out, and after a brief pause, she continued.

“I want to face this exam head-on. Other people are forming groups, trying to take control of the votes in order to ensure that they’re safe from expulsion. But, they’ll definitely regret doing that later on down the line. That’s why I… I want to stand up against them.”

Manabu silently looked on as she spoke, acknowledging the determination held within her eyes.

At the same time, he thought back to what Ayanokōji had told him the day before.

What she was trying to do was by no means easy.

But, with her own two hands, she was trying to do something that no one else could.

To resolve herself, she made up her mind and came to meet with her brother.

“How much time do you have?”

“I don’t have any plans after this…”

“Really?”

Suzune was somewhat taken aback by Manabu’s unexpected question.

“Then, I’d like to ask you a few things before I hear you out. What do you think of this school?”

“Eh?”

“Are you enjoying it here?”

“Ah. Uhm… I-I see.”

Her brother’s unexpected question had clearly caught her off-guard.

“I-I’m sorry. That, uh…”

Manabu didn’t reprimand her even though she was fumbling her words.

“Whether or not I enjoy being here… I honestly don’t know. At the very least, it’s not boring.”

“Is that so?”

Suzune couldn’t understand the meaning behind Manabu’s question.

After all, it had been quite a while since the last time she had a normal conversation with her brother.

“It seems you’ve managed to overcome one of your shortcomings.”

“My shortcomings…?”

“Indeed. You focused so much on yourself that you never paid attention to what was going on around you. By broadening your own horizons, you’ve managed to break away from spending your days in boredom.”

“You somehow… seem different today.”

In Suzune’s eyes, her older brother was serious and dedicated. Someone who pretty much never smiled.

Someone who would never neglect an opportunity to improve himself.

She felt like it was impossible for him to think of going to school as something to be enjoyed.

“You only ever paid attention to my academic achievements, always obsessed with scoring high on tests.”

“That’s because… you’ve always been my role model.”

This was something Suzune had already said many times over by this point, and Manabu’s face clouded over every time he heard it.

“Role model, huh?”

“…I understand. That it’s absolutely impossible for me to catch up with you. But still, striving to shorten the distance as much as possible shouldn’t be a bad thing.”

Despite being aware of her own shamelessness, she still wanted him to see how hard she was trying.

Without responding to his sister’s feelings, Manabu quietly closed his eyes for a moment.

“What do you think of Ayanokōji?”

“…What do I, think of him?”

“Just tell me your honest impression of him.”

“He’s an irritable classmate. Even though he’s capable enough to be recognized by you, I don’t like how he doesn’t even try to make use of it. But, I think that, someday, I’ll be able to catch up with him and, hopefully, surpass him.”

“It’s unfortunate, but you’ll never be able to catch up to Ayanokōji.”

“…”

“That said, there’s no need for you to catch up with him. It’s absolutely fine for you to grow at your own pace.”

“My own pace…”

Manabu moved a little closer to his sister.

If Suzune were to do the same, the distance between them would be short enough for their hands to reach each other.

However, Suzune wasn’t able to take that one step.

“Are you scared?”

“…Yes…”

This sense of distance was something Suzune hadn’t been able to overcome, even when she was younger.

It was so short, and yet so hopelessly far.

“To get closer, you have to be willing to take a step forward.”

“What can I do…? What can I do to get rid of this distance…?”

“Let me help you find the answers you’re looking for. So tell me, what do you want to put forward to your class?”

With a nod, Suzune slowly began explaining things to her brother.

Part 3

After school, the day before the vote.

Tomorrow, the decision would be made on which student to expel, and their seat in the class would be emptied.

There was a lingering feeling of uneasiness weighing down on everyone, but even so, they still had a reassuring belief that things would be alright.

This was because someone had been chosen as a sacrifice.

Ayanokōji Kiyotaka would be expelled from school.

More than half the class had already sided with this course of action.

Many of them were probably harboring some guilt about it right now.

And yet, that guilt was a small price to pay as long as they were able to save themselves.

After a while, the guilt would fade away.

A year from now, they would simply remember that I had been one of the students in their classroom.

That being said, I felt no resentment toward them. For the sake of avoiding expulsion, everyone had been desperately racking their brains to come up with countermeasures. Ultimately, I just happened to be the target.

After gaining pity from his classmates, Yamauchi skillfully won over Kushida and suggested a target for the vote based on sympathy and understanding.

Kushida then roped in the classmates she could. Since the invitation came from a trusted friend with whom they had confided their secrets, they were completely unable to turn her down.

Yamauchi's strategy wasn't bad. He took a risk and did his job well as the mastermind.

It was just a pity that he decided to go after me.

If his goal was really to avoid being expelled, he should've gone after Ike or Sudō instead.

After all, the two of them wouldn't have the capacity to recover from something like this.

Well, since Sakayanagi was the one actually pulling the strings, there was no way that was going to happen.

In any case, since it had come down to this, I had no choice but to take action to remove someone else instead.

But this time, I wouldn't be the one to do it.

I'm just a low-profile, unimpactful student who was being targeted by Yamauchi. I wasn't somebody capable of making a change in this situation.

The countenance of the girl sitting in the seat next to me had gone through far more change than I had anticipated.

Her whole body seemed to be giving off a different aura than before, glittering as though she had been hit by a magic spell.

"Well then, that's it for homeroom. Tomorrow is a Saturday, but there will still be an exam, so don't oversleep."

Chabashira's words marked the end of school for the day.

Everyone was ready to begin packing up their things and head home.

There was a brief moment of total silence.

Come on, Horikita. Move. I know you can do it.

She pushed back her chair and stood up from her desk.

"Could I have a moment?"

Horikita, her voice filled with confidence, called out to every student in the classroom.

It naturally managed to gather the attention of the class, curious as to what was going on.

“I’m sorry, but I’d like to ask everyone to refrain from going home for a moment.”

Even Chabashira seemed curious about what Horikita was up to, as she had stopped on her way out of the room.

“What’s the matter, Horikita-san?”

Hirata responded, reacting a beat faster than anyone else.

He was, after all, the most sensitive to subtle changes in the class’s atmosphere.

“I have something to say about the special exam tomorrow.”

“About the special exam?”

“O-oh look at the time… Well, I already had plans to go hang out with Kanji after this, so…”

“Tha… That’s right.”

Yamauchi and Ike spoke up, emphasizing the point that they didn’t have time to stick around.

“Both of you seem awfully composed. What with making arrangements to go play together even though one of you might be expelled tomorrow.”

When her eyes met with Yamauchi’s, he looked away in a hurry.

“That’s because… there’s no use, even if we struggle. We’ve already resolved ourselves for the worst.”

“Really? How praiseworthy. But I’m sorry, that doesn’t mean everyone else feels the same way as you. There’s no point in what I’m

trying to do here unless the whole class is able to hear what I have to say, so would you please be willing to put up with it for a bit?"

"Then what the heck are you gonna say?"

"There's something important I want to tell everyone concerning tomorrow's exam and who's going to be expelled."

Horikita walked to the front of the room and stood behind the teaching podium.

She probably wanted to be in a position where she could see everyone's faces properly.

"About who's being expelled…? What are you getting at?"

Yamauchi began talking notably faster than usual.

He was probably doing it involuntarily because of the combination of his own guilty conscience and the extraordinary atmosphere of the classroom.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking this past couple of days. Who should be expelled? Who should stay? How do we come to a proper decision? Earlier today, I managed to find a satisfactory answer to these troublesome questions. So please, allow me to lay it all out for everyone."

"Wait a minute, Horikita-san."

It was Hirata, not Yamauchi, who spoke up to stop her.

"Nobody in this class deserves to be expelled."

"Is that true? Isn't it possible that somebody does, though?"

"S-something like that…"

"I've had some serious concerns since the moment we were told about this exam. Even though it's important for us to be able to discuss things with each other and come to a decision about who we're going to expel, the school hasn't provided us with any class-

time to do it. As a result, it has become a battle where we form into groups and try to control the outcome of the vote. We're running the risk that we might end up expelling an excellent student, even though they shouldn't be considered for expulsion at all. Can we really call something like that an exam at all?"

Chabashira was the first person to look visibly impressed, shortly followed up by Kōenji.

"I haven't the faintest idea what's gotten into you, but you seem to me like an entirely different person. You've really gotten right to the heart of the matter, haven't you?"

With a clap of the hands, Kōenji continued to speak.

"Let us hear it, then. What do you suggest we do?"

"Originally, I thought we should hold a discussion with everyone in the class and collectively decide on who to expel. But I understand that, realistically speaking, that would be difficult. Therefore, allow me to nominate someone I think we should expel."

Hirata interjected.

"H-hold on Horikita-san!"

"Sorry, but I'm speaking right now. I'll give a proper explanation for my nomination later."

Staying conscious of how much time she was taking, Horikita pushed the discussion forward.

"No way. I'm against you throwing the class into chaos like this."

Even so, Hirata refused to back down.

It wasn't in his nature to do any differently.

"She's at least got the right to speak. We can listen to your objections after she's done."

Sudō cut in to stop Hirata from interfering.

“It’s as Red Hair-kun says. I’ve given up some of my valuable time to be here, so I’d appreciate it if you’d refrain from wasting it by being a hindrance.”

Kōenji spoke up in support of hearing Horikita out as well, seemingly interested in the direction the discussion was heading.

“B-but…”

Taking advantage of Hirata’s hesitation, Horikita once again opened her mouth.

“For this special exam… I have decided that we should expel Yamauchi Haruki-kun.”

Under the watchful gaze of the entire class, Horikita explicitly stated the full name of her nomination.

So far, outside of the public eye, several students had been nominated as targets for censure votes. However, Horikita was the first person to nominate a target publicly like this. One might ask, why hadn’t anyone else done the same thing? That was because they’d immediately gain the resentment of whoever they nominated. More importantly, if they failed to convince the rest of the class, there was a high probability that they would become a target themselves.

“W-why me, Horikitaa!?”

Naturally, Yamauchi was the first person to show any sort of reaction to this.

After all, if Horikita’s reckless nomination garnered enough support, he would become the target for the censure votes. It was effectively a death sentence.

“There’s a clear reason for it. To start out with, your contributions to the class over the past year have been particularly low.”

“T-that’s not true! My test scores have been higher than Ken’s this whole time!”

“He overtook you last time though?”

“That… but, that was just a one-time thing!!!”

“For argument’s sake, let’s say your academics are superior to Sudō-kun’s. Even then, you’re still several levels beneath him in terms of physical ability.”

“Then isn’t Kanji in the same boat as me!? He’s definitely worse than me when it comes to physical fitness!”

Naturally, Yamauchi desperately tried to defend himself.

Anybody would get desperate if they were being singled out in front of everyone like this.

“It’s true that there are a handful of students who are all on a somewhat similar playing field. I’ll give you that much.”

“T-that’s right. Nominating me so seriously… Could ya please give me a break…?”

“However, you’re still a half-step behind, even compared to the rest of them. When I assigned everyone a priority by taking into account their behavior during lessons, tardiness and absence history, and strengths and weaknesses, you ended up in dead last. The runner-up was Ike-kun, followed up immediately by Sudō-kun. This is the conclusion I came to yesterday.”

“I… I’m a candidate as well!?”

Panicking a bit, Sudō spoke up.

“You’ve certainly improved in terms of academic ability and critical thinking these past few months, but that doesn’t just get rid of all of the times you’ve been a burden to class. Or am I wrong?”

“…No, you’re right.”

With the facts laid out in front of him, Sudō accepted them for what they were.

Ike’s expression was heavy, seeming to have come to terms with it as well.

“Are you being serious with all this nonsense!? This is pissing me off! Right!? Kanji!? Ken!?”

Yamauchi tried to bring the two Horikita had nominated as other candidates over to his side, but neither of them had the words to refute what Horikita had said.

“Plus, I’m kinda lovable, right? At least when compared to someone like Kōenji. That problem child totally abandoned the class during several special exams!”

“It’s true that Kōenji-kun has a lot of work to do to improve his behavior. However, he was able to understand the significance of holding this discussion. If I were to put an overall worth to his abilities, the difference between the two of you would be so large that you couldn’t even begin to compare. At the very least, he’s not somebody we should be expelling during this exam.”

Kōenji let show a fearless smile laced with complacency as he crossed his arms in front of him.

“I can’t accept this! I really just can’t anymore!”

“Then, how about I tell you the final reason why you were chosen among all other options?”

Horikita pressured Yamauchi, calmly interrupting him in the middle of his fit.

“F-final reason?”

Horikita’s unusual aura made Yamauchi momentarily shrink back.

“There should be something you’ve been feeling guilty about that you haven’t been willing to tell anyone. Am I wrong?”

Yamauchi was overwhelmed by Horikita’s confident words.

“I don’t have anything to feel guilty about…”

“Seeing as you don’t feel like saying it yourself, I’ll say it for you. In order to protect yourself, you used Kushida-san as an intermediary to

gather support from our classmates, all to get Ayanokōji-kun expelled. Isn't that right?"

"Hah!?"

The classroom descended into an uproar.

Even though over half the class was aware of the vote manipulation, none of them knew that the true culprit behind all of it was Yamauchi.

"You were planning to have Ayanokōji-kun expelled…?"

Ayanokōji Group members aside, Hirata was one of the people genuinely, visibly, shocked to hear that I was being targeted.

Hirata was the type to always stay neutral and think about the class as a whole, so it made sense that he wasn't willing to accept it.

"Yes. It's an undeniable fact. Isn't that right, everyone?"

Kushida had gotten many students tied up in Yamauchi's plan.

Even if they didn't make eye contact with her, they would surely feel shaken if they had an inkling as to what had been going on.

This was enough for Hirata to realize that more than half the class had joined Yamauchi's group.

"Hmm… Everyone seems a lot calmer than I had imagined…"

"Your plan started out with a small group of people and you steadily expanded from there. If you managed to gather up the majority of the class's censure votes, your target's expulsion would be effectively guaranteed, right?"

"I-I had nothing to do with that!"

Despite claiming otherwise, Yamauchi made no further attempts to defend himself.

"Then who did?"

“I-I dunno, okay!? I… was just told to cast my censure vote for Ayanokōji!”

Lying in desperation like this usually didn’t result in things turning out the way you wanted.

“If you don’t know who started it, then why don’t you tell me who told you to cast your censure vote for Ayanokōji-kun instead?”

“That’s… uh…”

“You had to have heard it from somebody, right? You’re not going to say you don’t know, are you?”

Yamauchi seemed nearly at his wit’s end as he looked around the classroom.

“…Kanji! I heard it from Kanji! Right dude!?”

He proceeded to pin the blame on his best friend.

“What? No! It wasn’t me!”

Naturally, Ike denied it.

“Is that really true, Ike-kun?”

“No no no no no. It absolutely wasn’t me. I heard it from…”

Ike was, understandably, at a loss for words.

After all, the person who had suggested it to him was none other than Kushida, and he couldn’t just sell her out.

“From your silence, I’m sensing that you’re incapable of providing an answer. In which case, perhaps you really are the mastermind like Yamauchi-kun says?”

“No, no! So, err… Kikyō-chan came to me, asking for help… She said that there was someone who was in a lot of trouble, so she needed me to cast my censure vote for Ayanokōji.”

This time, Ike passed the blame along to Kushida.

Of course, there was no way Kushida was going to sit back and let this happen.

She hated the idea of being targeted more than anyone else in the room.

“Don’t tell me that you’re the mastermind, Kushida-san?”

Horikita was determined to trace down each lead until she got to the bottom of this.

In a situation like this where a specific person was being targeted, it wasn’t a very big deal if she didn’t find out the identity of the mastermind. By questioning people one at a time like this, she’d eventually find out the truth either way.

“I… well… a certain someone approached me, saying they needed my help, so… it was kind of hard to turn them down…”

“And just who is this ‘certain someone’?”

Ultimately, the blame that Yamauchi had tried so hard to avoid was about to come around full circle.

But Yamauchi, getting overwhelmed by anxiety, hurriedly tried to pass it on once again.

“Th-that’s right! I was told by Kikyō-chan! She asked me to help her get Ayanokōji expelled!”

Spurred on by a single lie, there was no way of knowing when this chain reaction of accusations would come to an end.

“M-me!?”

“Everyone else also heard it from Kikyō-chan, right? Right? Am I right?”

Kushida had indeed been the one entrusted to act as an intermediary.

However, there was something that most everyone in the class understood.

And that, was that Kushida Kikyō was a student who would only ever take action for the sake of her friends, and she would never do something to try and trick or frame somebody.

The difference in the amount of trust they had managed to build up was more than clear.

“You’re so cruel Yamauchi-kun… I… even though I really didn’t want to abandon Ayanokōji-kun, you came asking for my help… but, even though I did the best I could…”

Kushida spoke, burying her face down into her desk, her voice filled with anguish.

It was probably all that the class needed to hear to get a grasp on who was really telling the truth. The scene of Yamauchi earnestly begging for Kushida to help him was probably playing through all their minds.

Yamauchi’s predicament was steadily getting worse and worse, and it would only continue to deteriorate moving forward. Of course, this must’ve also been a headache for Kushida, but given the situation, there was no helping it if she wanted to avoid being targeted.

After all, the absolute worst-case scenario was expulsion.

“…Kushida-san.”

Horikita called out to Kushida, who was covering her face.

Everyone probably thought she was about to say something to comfort her.

“Your actions have also been a huge mistake.”

With a strong tone, Horikita reprimanded her.

“In this class, you hold influence on the same level as Hirata-kun and Karuizawa-san… No, your influence is even stronger than theirs. As such, if you nominate someone as a target, a great number of your classmates are going to listen to you.”

“I-I didn’t want that. I just wanted to help Yamauchi-kun…”

“Stop with the sophistry, you aren’t that stupid. You should’ve known what would happen if you helped him from the very beginning.”

Facing Horikita’s reproachful words, Kushida stood up from her desk, weeping.

“I didn’t think that far ahead! It’s just, I couldn’t simply ignore Yamauchi-kun’s problem… his suffering… I had to help somehow!”

“No, you knew. You ignored the problem at hand, knowing very well what the outcome would be.”

Confronted with Horikita’s excessive prodding, Kushida flinched, faltering with her response.

In this situation, she couldn’t aggressively retort back to Horikita even if she wanted to.

There was absolutely no way she would break character and take off her mask under these circumstances.

There was no way Horikita didn’t understand this as well.

“This ordeal was caused by your own lapse in judgment. You should’ve done something about it much sooner.”

“That… I don’t know what to do…”

“You should reflect on what has happened here and strive to take actions that will benefit the class from now on.”

Horikita said the final word on the matter, turning a deaf ear to Kushida’s excuses.

“Be that as it may, it seems there’s no mistaking the fact that the primary offender is Yamauchi-kun.”

Horikita dropped her temporary focus on Kushida’s wrongdoings once again swapped her attention back to Yamauchi.

“W-wait Horikita. I told you it wasn’t me…”

“My my, this has been quite the interesting discussion. Though, isn’t it only natural for the boy to try and get somebody else removed from school? Pushing past all the nonsensical formalities, this exam is nothing more than the rabble of the class fighting for their own survival. Or, is there any particular reason why only he should be condemned, hmm?”

Kōenji made a statement that didn’t appear to align with anyone, although it was probably going to end up working out in Horikita’s favor.

“Right you are. While assembling a group with the intention of getting rid of somebody else may not be the most praiseworthy thing to do, it surely doesn’t seem fair to blame him for simply trying to survive. Well, that’s only if that’s all there is to it.”

“Oh?”

“Yamauchi-kun. You haven’t been trying to expel Ayanokōji-kun just to protect yourself, have you?”

“W-wait! I said to wait! I told you it wasn’t me!”

“How ugly. Everyone presently in this classroom fully believes it was, so come now let’s hear it. Why did he target Ayanokōji-boy?”

Horikita nodded her head in agreement.

“He, Yamauchi-kun, has been colluding with Sakayanagi-san behind the scenes, taking orders and carrying them out for her.”

The truth was exposed to broad daylight.

“That’s quite the worrisome piece of information, now isn’t it? Collusion with a student from Class A… How unpleasant.”

This was probably the reason why Kōenji had involved himself with this discussion in the first place.

Kōenji was still at risk of being expelled, so he was probably looking

to make use of Horikita to avoid the danger. By revealing a truly unnecessary student, the class would put them to trial instead.

Even if Yamauchi hadn't colluded with Sakayanagi or targeted someone else, the fact that he was the most unnecessary student in the class still hadn't changed. It probably would've ended up like this either way.

It's probably fair to say that the time needed to back Yamauchi into a corner had been considerably reduced, thanks to the fact that he had gone along with Sakayanagi's scheme.

"Oi Haruki, you've been colluding with Sakayanagi-chan…?"

Not only was his role as the mastermind revealed, but his connection with Class A had as well.

Even his best friend Ike wasn't able to take this news sitting down.

"T-that's nonsense! There's no evidence!"

"I wonder if you'd be willing to show me your phone, then? You should have Sakayanagi-san registered in your contacts."

"That's… because we're friends! There's nothing suspicious about me having her registered!"

It's true that there wouldn't be anything suspicious about it if the two of them really did have a friendly relationship.

However, the fact that, recently, Sakayanagi had openly contacted Yamauchi was fresh in the minds of everyone in the classroom.

Horikita had probably asked Yamauchi about his contacts in order to remind everyone of what had taken place.

"Do… do you seriously have ties with Sakayanagi-chan?"

Coming from his closest friend, Ike's question felt scornful.

"I-I'm telling you… Why would I join up with Class A!? I'd never betray my friends! This is really the first time I've ever heard about

this! Come on and give me a break already…!”

At his wit’s end, Yamauchi played the victim.

“Wrong. Under her orders, you convinced our classmates to target Ayanokōji-kun. After all, she’s much more clever than you are. She gave you clear instructions on how to get Ayanokōji-kun expelled from the school.”

“N-no no no!”

“Furthermore, there was probably also something that convinced Yamauchi-kun to willingly cooperate with her. Something like an invitation to start dating, perhaps?”

“Agh!”

Bull’s-eye. As Horikita pointed out the one truth that he wanted to keep hidden more than anything else, Yamauchi expressed a whole new kind of agitation.

This was probably something Horikita had deduced all on her own, and based on his reaction, it seemed that she had hit it right on the mark.

“There’s no reason for the class to expel someone far superior to you like Ayanokōji-kun because of this stupid, worthless motive of yours. This is the primary reason why I nominate you for expulsion.”

Horikita spoke not toward Yamauchi, but toward the entirety of the class.

“None of us want to lose one of our classmates. However, you

betrayed your own class and colluded with the enemy. You even tried to target one of your very own friends… You are, without a doubt, the most unnecessary student in the class."

"Th-That's…"

You could practically hear the cogs turning inside Yamauchi's head as he frantically thought about how to get out of his current situation.

"If… Even if we assume what you're saying is true… why am I the only one being criticized for it? Trying to protect myself by working with another class is a legitimate form of self-defense, isn't it!? It's not like I want to be expelled!"

"I see. So essentially, you're asking 'what's wrong with trying to protect myself?', right?"

It was a pitiful, stubborn excuse, but Yamauchi still wasn't willing to admit to it.

"Self-preservation is certainly important. However, I don't see very much value in someone who's willing to throw away one of their peers in order to gain that protection, much less someone who's sold their soul to an enemy."

Horikita wouldn't stand down, no matter how much Yamauchi tried to resist.

"Y-you're just standing up for Ayanokōji because you're on good terms with him!"

"Not at all. This was the objective outcome of a calm, composed judgment. Both you and Ayanokōji-kun started out from the very same place. Comparing the two of you side by side, the difference between your overall contribution to the class is painfully clear. Furthermore, considering your connection with Class A, there's simply no more room for discussion."

"No objections here. I believe that Horikita-girl's proposal is quite desirable. We certainly don't want to keep around someone who could potentially betray the class. I certainly couldn't spend time with a student who could potentially betray the class. She has my

support.”

With that, Kōenji was the first to support for Horikita’s proposal.

“Wait! I haven’t betrayed anyone! I swear on my life!”

As a last-ditch effort, Yamauchi swore on his life to prove he wasn’t lying.

It was hard to say whether or not his sentiment managed to reach his fellow classmates.

“Oh! Then, why in the world is it Ayanokōji, huh!?”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Even if I really was somehow taking orders from Sakayanagi-chan, instead of trying to expel someone like Ayanokōji, wouldn’t it make more sense for me to target someone more dangerous?”

This was probably a lingering doubt from back when Sakayanagi had first approached him. Instead of Ayanokōji, why not pick one of the central figures of the class like Hirata or Karuizawa?

“I’m guessing that it’s because he doesn’t stand out very much, for better or worse. Even if she wanted you to expel a more outstanding student, you wouldn’t be able to do so very easily. So, she chose someone unobtrusive like Ayanokōji-kun. As far as Sakayanagi-san was concerned, it probably didn’t matter who got expelled. She just wanted a spy, a chess piece she could move however she wanted.”

There was no way somebody like Yamauchi could’ve resisted getting caught up in such a cunning strategy.

“I’m guessing that there are some of you who aren’t too happy about my nomination as well. In which case, please feel free to cast your censure vote for me. Whether you want to vote for Yamauchi-kun or Ayanokōji-kun, or even anybody else, just go ahead and do it. I just felt that I needed to share my opinion with everyone, which is exactly why I decided to hold this discussion in the first place. Please try to account for this as you come to your own decision.”

Horikita spoke confidently, resolved to put everything on the line for what she believed was right, and it was probably going to pay off.

However, Sudō proceeded to chime in once again.

“Hold up, Suzune… I think I understand the gist of the situation. I also get that Haruki is the one in the wrong here…”

His expression was gloomy. This was a desperate show of resistance from someone who always abided by Horikita’s orders.

“But, I’m against having Haruki get expelled.”

“Well, he is your friend. I’m well aware of how important he is to you.”

However, Horikita had already anticipated that Sudō would choose to back Yamauchi.

Yet, Sudō also wasn’t willing to simply back down.

“He’s my friend, so I’m gonna protect him. That makes sense right? I know it’s pretty bad that he went and did what he did with Class A and all but… we don’t gotta expel him for that. Isn’t it all good as long as he reflects and seriously contributes moving forward?”

“If that was the case, there’d be no need to expel Ayanokōji-kun either, since he hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“T-that’s-”

“This whole perspective of yours is flawed, Sudō-kun.”

Horikita took a short breath, readying herself to bring forth all the courage she could muster.

She stood tall, having fully resolved herself to be hated by her peers.

“By protecting one person, you’re abandoning somebody else. It follows that this exam isn’t about sentiment. It’s about theory.”

Sudō opened his mouth but proceeded to sink into silence.

His desire to help his friend was clear.

But in order to do that, it meant that somebody else would have to be expelled instead.

Forming a group and trying to control the votes was, in and of itself, a mistake.

Until today, the class had been free to take whatever action they saw fit for the upcoming exam. Everyone had been consumed with negative thoughts, thinking specific people deserved to be expelled. Thinking that there was no point in fighting back against something that had already seemed to be decided upon.

This was exactly why it had come down to this. Everyone had realized that they aren't able to take action for the sake of the class and that they just wanted to save themselves. If Horikita had done this on the day the exam was announced, it probably wouldn't have been nearly as effective. More importantly, if she had appealed to the class before they had been forced to go through this special exam, her words probably wouldn't have resonated with them. But now, everyone should be able to understand just how difficult and frightening it is to take the initiative and try to expel one of your classmates.

"Sorry, Haruki… I can't do anything for you…"

Honestly, Sudō's newfound maturity was shocking. He still had a tendency where he'd easily lose his temper after some small provocations, so while he had some ways to go, he was broadening his own horizons, little by little.

Even though it was a choice between me and a close friend, he had been able to put my relatively close relationship with Horikita aside and calmly come to a reasonable decision.

"Looks like it's decided then, Horikita-girl."

Kōenji and the other spectators were ready to hand down their verdict.

"Wait! Wait! Stop!"

Yamauchi began shouting, begging for them to stop.

“It’d be stupid of you to waste your censure votes on me!!!”

“I’ve already made up my mind. Nobody here deserves to be voted for more than you do.”

“Yeah but! I’ve already made an agreement with everyone to vote for Ayanokōji!”

“…I… take back everything…”

“Huh?”

Kushida spoke quietly, her eyes cast downward.

“I made a mistake… I wanted to help Yamauchi-kun… but I didn’t realize the gravity of the situation. I’m taking back what I asked of everyone…”

Given the situation, in order to avoid ruining her own reputation, Kushida had no choice but to side with Horikita.

“Wait wait. What’re you saying!? You’re breaking your own promise!!! How cruel!”

“You’re the cruel one here Yamauchi-kun… going as far as to betray your own classmates…”

And now, Yamauchi was completely alone.

The feeling of being targeted by many of your peers was one he should know better than anyone.

“You are the weakest link in the class, and you’re a traitor.”

Horikita reiterated her point with both indifference and composure.

“That’s everything I wanted to say.”

With this, she attempted to bring the discussion to a close.

There didn’t appear to be anybody willing to oppose her anymore.

“In conclusion, I’d like to hear the opinions of everyone here. What are your thoughts?”

However…

“I want you to hold on for a second, Horikita-san.”

“…Is something the matter?”

A male student raised his hand and proceeded to stand up from his seat.

If there was a sole factor that had fallen outside of Horikita’s calculations, it would have to be the existence of Hirata Yōsuke.

“Even though I’ve stayed silent and let you say everything you wanted to say, I must object to the way you’re inducing the rest of the class to vote with you. For comrades to come together to kick somebody out like this… it’s just plain wrong.”

Hirata’s words didn’t come from a place of sentiment like Sudō, nor did they from logic like Horikita. Instead, they came from a place of suffering and resistance, spurned forward from his inability to come to an answer.

“There isn’t any other way. This exam doesn’t have any loopholes. It’s unreasonable, but somebody in our class is, without a shadow of a doubt, going to be sacrificed. Don’t tell me you still haven’t come to terms with this yet?”

“How could I possibly come to terms with it? I… I don’t want to lose anyone. It’d be different if somebody wanted to be expelled, but whether it’s Yamauchi-kun or Ayanokōji-kun, neither of them actually do.”

“Neither of them actually want it? You’d be hard-pressed to find anyone who actually wants it. How about I raise a pointless question to the rest of the class? Could I get a show of hands of everyone who feels like they want to be expelled from the school? If you come out now, there won’t be any need for any of this anymore. The rest of us will unanimously cast our censure votes for you and wash our hands of all of this.”

Not a single person raised their hand. If there actually was such a convenient student, they would've already announced their candidacy ages ago.

"Do you get it now?"

"No. There's no way I'd be willing to accept something so horrible."

The perfect honor's student, well-versed in both sports and academics. A truly virtuous guy.

But despite all of that, Hirata Yōsuke's weakness was revealed.

When the time comes and he's pressured to make a decisive decision, he's overwhelmed, unable to do anything at all.

"I have faith in my decision to push forward here, regardless of whether you're willing to accept it or not, so let's take a vote. Here and now."

"There's no reason for us to do that. There's no way to guarantee who people will vote for tomorrow."

"That's not true. It's important to keep an eye on the voting trends of our classmates."

"It's pointless. Everyone… everyone's trying to get someone expelled! I can't…!"

Hirata was probably afraid that Horikita's actions would spark a fire that would burn out of control, causing personal information such as 'who hates who' to be made public.

"Well then, everyone, let's get on with it."

Horikita disregarded Hirata and once again attempted to take the vote.

Nobody could stop her anymore. It was the moment of truth.

"Horikita-san!"

A loud, unnatural sound echoed throughout the classroom.

Something happened that nobody in the room had even slightly expected.

Hirata had kicked over his desk, sending it flying forward as it toppled to the ground.

“Wha… Uhm, H-Hirata-kun?”

I could hear the voice of one of the girls, reeling in utter disbelief.

And to be fair, I was just as surprised.

It was the type of situation that made me wonder if he had simply gotten carried away and his foot had accidentally made contact with his desk.

The same was true for Chabashira.

His unbelievable behavior was simply far too unexpected.

“Would you just stop, Horikita-san?”

He had lowered the tone of his voice, as though he was trying to scare her into backing down.

“…What do you want me to stop?”

Horikita answered with a question of her own, adjusting her bangs to help hide her outright shock.

“I’m telling you, stop it with this vote.”

“You don’t have the right…”

Hirata’s daunting words caused her voice to waver just a little.

That was just how much intensity his voice carried.

“This discussion has been a mistake.”

“If so, then what in the world should we be doing? It’s not like you

have any ideas. You haven't been doing anything this entire time."

"…So what?"

"…So what? I'm saying it's a problem. You haven't been making a proper assessment of the situation."

"Shut up…"

"No, I won't shut up. I-"

"Horikita… just shut your mouth already."

Hirata spoke sharply, coldly interrupting her. His words were far heavier than anything we had ever heard him say before.

It felt as though the air within the classroom had frozen over.

"Listen up, everyone."

Hirata's tone had changed as he addressed the class, making him seem like a different person entirely.

"It doesn't matter at all whether everything that's been said so far is true or not."

"…It wasn't! She was definitely lying, Hirata! I'm just a victim here!"

Yamauchi clamored to Hirata, having been forced into a dire situation.

"Victim?"

"Er…"

Hirata's deep, relentless gaze pierced through Yamauchi.

"After everything that's been said, there's no way you're innocent here."

"That's… I…"

"The fact that you guys are fine with betraying one your own makes

me sick to my stomach."

His anger wasn't just directed toward Yamauchi, but the class as a whole.

"It's an exam. We don't have any other choice."

"Either way, it's wrong to manipulate the vote like this."

"The exam is tomorrow. Are you saying that we should sit back and not do anything to prepare ourselves? That'd be no different from just silently allowing Yamauchi-kun's betrayal."

"What's wrong with not having a plan? We have no right to judge our classmates."

"What are you even saying…? Isn't that exactly what this special exam is asking of us? In fact, many of us actually want this."

Horikita knew this precisely because she had been standing up at the podium, taking in the gazes of her classmates.

However, Hirata wasn't willing to even try to accept this.

"…Aren't you the actual problem here?"

His low, heavy voice resonated throughout the classroom.

Even now, my brain refused to accept that this cold voice was coming from Hirata.

"It's true that this exam is far too heartless and cruel. I'll never be able to accept it. But, even so… if you can somehow get yourself to tolerate it, it's really nothing more than just a normal class poll. By no means is it here for you to pit everyone against each other like this."

"That's unrealistic. Behind the scenes, our classmates have been forming a group, holding discussions about how to manipulate the results of the vote. Ayanokōji-kun was going to take on all of that by himself."

“Yes. That’s also deplorable. Regardless, your blatant appeal to the entire class is a different thing entirely.”

“It’s the same. There’s no difference. You should’ve stopped their plotting yourself if you really wanted to stay true to this hypocritical mindset of yours.”

Nobody could cut into their conversation at this point.

Hirata was the on the edge of desperation, and the only person capable of talking it out with him was Horikita.

“Besides, even without taking a vote here, I’ve already finished explaining everything. Don’t you realize that this ‘normal vote’ you wanted is already completely gone?”

“That’s right… The die has been cast. You can’t take back what’s been said.”

Hirata took a deep breath before continuing.

He regained a little bit of his composure, but there was no change in his cold attitude.

“That’s why I’m going to cast my vote for you tomorrow, Horikita-san. I won’t allow you to cause problems for this class again.”

Hirata was well aware of his own numerous inconsistencies. Nonetheless, he gets along with everyone in the class and values peace and camaraderie more than anyone. Which, consequently, was exactly why he was suffering.

“Yes. Do as you want.”

Horikita didn’t seem dissatisfied. It was as if she was encouraging the class to do the same if they agreed with him.

Having watched over the entire ordeal, Chabashira quietly approached the teaching podium.

“Is that all, Horikita?”

“Yes.”

Horikita yielded the podium and returned to her seat.

Classes had already been dismissed for the day, and this was no place for a teacher to interfere.

But even so, Chabashira once again stood before her students.

“You all may think this exam is an unreasonable, terrible thing being forced upon you by the school. However, once you enter society, you will definitely encounter a situation where someone has to be cast aside. Upper and senior management have to be willing to bring the hammer down when needed. The students who study at this school are nurtured to become important factors in the future success of Japan. You won’t be able to grow if you perceive this exam as a simple means for the school to foster harassment.”

In society, people who are hindrances are fired in order to protect the group as a whole.

Following this chain of logic, there are also backroom deals and vilification much like what had been done these past few days.

There are certainly factors of this special exam meant to help us mature into adulthood. However, it is by no means kind to force a group of students, still immature of both mind and body, to make this kind of judgment. The exam may end up negatively influencing the future of the students.

“I’m not going to provide my perspective on this discussion of yours. I believe everybody’s participation has been valuable. I hope you all think carefully before you cast your votes tomorrow.”

With that, Chabashira left the classroom, having finished listening to the entire discussion.

Me? Yamauchi? Horikita? Possibly Hirata? Or perhaps even somebody else?

It was unclear who exactly people would be voting for in tomorrow’s vote. In other words, the person being expelled tomorrow was still

completely up in the air, and nobody would be able to find fault with it.

That’s just the kind of special exam this is.

Part 4

Haruka and the rest of the Ayanokōji Group approached me immediately after Chabashira left the classroom.

Horikita and Yamauchi left the classroom right away.

“Are you free right now?”

“Hm? Yeah.”

I actually wanted to talk to Hirata a little bit but…

Without showing any particular sort of emotion on his face, Hirata quietly left the classroom alone.

Since my situation had been made public, ignoring the Ayanokōji Group didn’t seem like a very good idea.

“Let’s go to the cafe!”

We collectively agreed with Haruka’s suggestion and left the classroom behind.

We all entered the hallway together, none of us even thinking of heading over to the cafe alone.

“Is this alright? If worst comes to worst, the rest of you might be targeted by Yamauchi’s group.”

“If they want to aim for us then bring it on! I absolutely won’t let somebody from our group be expelled.”

Contrary to her usual behavior, Haruka’s anger was more pronounced and didn’t seem to be letting up.

“I have the same opinion. There isn’t a single reason why Kiyotaka should be expelled.”

Keisei spoke up in agreement, with Akito and Airi nodding along.

“I thought it was strange that we didn’t find out any information, but it makes sense that we couldn’t, what with their target being somebody in our group.”

No matter how much they investigated, they wouldn’t have been able to catch on to the identity of the large group’s target.

Keisei seemed to understand this well enough.

We arrived at the cafe. After everyone finished ordering their drinks, Haruka broke the ice.

“I think Yamauchi-kun is a really good choice for our censure votes. Well, rather, I totally don’t think there’s any other option.”

“No objections here, but what about our other two votes?”

“Isn’t it, like, fine to vote for the people who’re still supporting him?”

“Won’t there be a huge drop in the number of his supporters now that it’s been made public that he’s got connections with Sakayanagi? Even Ike and Sudō weren’t bold enough to say anything to defend him.”

“Yeah, but since they’re his friends, I feel like they’ll cast him a praise vote out of sympathy.”

Haruka’s prediction was probably correct.

Even though he’d been branded a traitor, Yamauchi had only taken action to protect himself.

From another perspective, it could be said that he had simply been taken advantage of by Sakayanagi. It’s not like there was no room for sympathy.

Horikita was the one who had incited all the hate for Yamauchi… Well… No, I had been the one behind that.

Yamauchi was the mastermind, and Sakayanagi was the one pulling

the strings behind him.

I informed the elder Horikita about everything, and had him relay the information to his sister.

If, by any chance, she hadn't taken action, I would have just done the same thing she had done myself.

"I wonder how many censure votes Kiyotaka is actually gonna get? Out of the boys, there's Yamauchi along with Ike and Sudō, and beyond those three, Hondō, Ijuin, Miyamoto, and Sotomura all seem to be on fairly good terms with him."

There only seemed to be seven censure votes from the boys in the class.

"What about the girls?"

"I have no doubts that Horikita-san will cast a praise vote for Kiyotaka-kun and a censure vote for Yamauchi-kun. I don't know what the other girls are gonna do though… Do you know Airi?"

"…Satō-san and Karuizawa-san probably won't vote against him… I think…"

"Why?"

"I don't know why, it's just a feeling but…"

Airi trailed off as she tried to explain it to Keisei, and Haruka chimed in.

"It's a woman's intuition."

"We can't rely on that."

Keisei wasn't going to count these votes with this explanation alone.

"Yes we can. It's real weird, but I think she's on the right track. Especially since it's Airi we're talking about here."

"What's that supposed to mean? Satō aside, how could she possibly

know anything about Karuizawa?”

Unable to understand her reasoning, Keisei doubtfully tilted his head.

“Don’t worry about it. Like, let’s just say we can count those two out from voting for him.”

“This is sloppy…”

“However, other than those three, it’s still pretty unclear what the rest of the girls will do.”

“Yea. There are a lot of girls who don’t like Yamauchi-kun though. Even if they go through with their promises to vote for Kiyopon, they’ll probably end up casting one for him as well.”

“Looking at it from a psychological perspective, that’s probably true. For somebody who’s simply looking to get through the exam, they’ll be able to save themselves by casting their votes for people with the highest chance of being expelled. They probably see it as a one-on-one fight for survival between Kiyotaka and Yamauchi, and the remaining votes will probably be scattered among the other options.”

Keisei went into the facts of the matter based on everything he’d heard so far.

For instance, Kōenji had been a prime target for the class’s censure votes, but even so, that mindset had probably lost some traction. Casting a censure vote for Kōenji would mean disregarding his strengths, and since there are several students actively dragging their feet and holding the class back from moving forward, Kōenji would probably end up being safe.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine, Kiyotaka-kun.”

“Yeah, thank you.”

In the back of her mind, Airi was probably still somewhat anxious that some of the remaining censure votes would be cast for her.

And yet, she offered me resolute words of encouragement without letting this anxiety show through.

“Anyhow, isn’t Kiyopon the calmest one here?”

“It’s just that there’s nothing I can do. My thoughts have been filled with uneasiness.”

“Don’t worry. Thanks to Horikita, things aren’t looking too bad anymore. Rather, it’s kinda like you’ve been saved by her.”

If it weren’t for Horikita, there’s a good chance that most of the class would’ve faced the exam without knowing anything about what had been happening.

Without even a second thought, they would’ve gone and cast their vote for me just to save themselves.

An outcome like that was far too easy for me to imagine.

“But… I wonder how Horikita-san found out about Yamauchi-kun’s betrayal.”

Airi casually posed a crucial new question.

“Our group is close with Kiyotaka-kun, so it makes sense that none of us heard anything about it, right? I thought Horikita-san would be in the same kinda situation as us is all…”

“That’s true… It doesn’t seem like Horikita tried to go and form a group either.”

Yamauchi was probably frustrated about this as well. He was most likely thinking that someone in the large group he had created betrayed him, even going as far as to spill everything to Horikita.

In the first place, he probably wouldn’t have been able to notice the information leak, nor do anything about it.

“I don’t know who, but there must’ve been somebody who didn’t want Kiyopon to be expelled, right?”

“Probably. At least there’s one good egg in the bunch.”

None of them were able to realize that this ‘somebody’ was both Kei

and myself.

Part 5

On the way back to the dorms, we came across Hirata sitting on one of the benches wearing the same listless expression on his face.

If somebody else were to see him like this, they'd probably reconsider any ideas to call out to him.

After all, nobody had ever seen him like this before.

"He looks pretty defeated."

"Yeah… He's completely different from usual."

Both Haruka and Akito immediately recognized how surreal the situation was.

"I think I'll try talking to him a little."

"Give it up Kiyotaka. Wouldn't it be better to just leave him be right now?"

"Maybe, but there's something that's been bothering me."

"Something that's been bothering you?"

"Sorry about this, but you guys can head back without me. I don't feel like he'd be willing to say very much if we tried to reach out to him as a group. If he's going to get angry with somebody, I'd rather it be just me instead of all of us."

"…Alright, but the vote happens tomorrow, so just don't do anything to rub him the wrong way. There's honestly no way of telling who Hirata's going to vote for right now."

I nodded in response to Akito's advice and separated from the group.

I was grateful that they were able to read the situation and head back

to the dorms without looking back.

Before I did anything else, I took a picture of his defeated appearance from a distance and sent it to Kei with a few other details.

“Hirata.”

In order to make the most of this opportunity, I called out to him immediately after I hit send.

“…Ayanokōji-kun.”

“Do you have a minute?”

“Yeah sure. I, uh, also wanted to talk with you.”

It was possible that he had been sitting here waiting for me.

Otherwise, there’d be no point in choosing to sit in such a cold place.

Furthermore, he was sitting off to one side of the bench, quite possibly with the hope of having someone else to sit together with him.

I sat down in the open space beside him.

“A warm spring will be coming soon.”

“Yeah.”

“I… believed that everyone would be able to welcome that spring together. No, even now, somewhere inside my heart, I still do.”

Hirata spoke passionately, even though the class had nearly gone through a collapse not too long ago.

Even though everyone had witnessed his foolish, ugly behavior back in the classroom, this core part of his personality still hadn’t changed.

“Having to leave someone behind… I hate it.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it. Whether it’s me, Yamauchi, or someone else entirely, somebody has to be the sacrifice.”

Hirata's expression still didn't carry any hints of emotion.

"Could I entrust it to you?"

"Entrust what?"

"Class C. I want you to lead everyone in my stead from now on."

"Don't be so reckless. I wouldn't be able to do something so outrageous. Hirata, if you want to protect the class, you need to do it yourself."

"That's impossible. I… just can't do that anymore."

He was probably frustrated with himself for being unable to come to a decision. These kinds of thoughts were probably the only thing he had on his mind.

But that wasn't everything.

"I made the same mistake again. I even reflected on it back then, and yet…"

Immersed in bitterness, tears began to well up in the corner of his eyes.

I found myself wondering just how much anguish Hirata had gone through because of this exam.

"I'd be able to feel at ease entrusting the class to someone like you."

He sighed, his white breath dispersing into the cold air.

There was nothing dazzling or enviable about the look on our class leader's face.

"This special exam. Cast one censure vote for me and one for Yamauchi. It'd be fine for you to cast your last one for Horikita if you want."

"So you're telling me I should leave the decision in the hands of the rest of the class."

There was no need for Hirata to explicitly choose someone.

He could choose to leave it to the other 39 students in the class instead.

“You really are amazing, Ayanokōji-kun.”

“I’m nothing special.”

“I was approached by both Horikita-san and Yamauchi-kun as I’ve sat here. Horikita-san told me to vote for Yamauchi-kun, and Yamauchi-kun told me to vote for you. They both claimed to want something different than the other. However, you’re the only one who hasn’t tried to throw someone else under the bus. That’s not something just anyone can do.”

That was only because, from a strategic standpoint, it was better to not say anything.

In this situation, it wasn’t a very good idea to try and force Hirata to vote along with you.

It’s just that I had come to this conclusion ahead of time.

“I’m glad I talked with you. I… I really feel like I might be able to find an answer now.”

“Is that so?”

Hirata stood up.

It seemed as though he had found his own way to get through the exam.

But, I wasn’t about to agree with his way of thinking.

“Wanna head back?”

At his suggestion, the two of us began walking back to the dormitories without exchanging another word.

Chapter 6: “The Other Classes’ Ideas”

Introduction

From the very beginning, Class D's stance on what to do hadn't changed in the slightest.

Approximately ninety percent of the class reached the same conclusion when the supplemental exam was first announced.

And by Friday, the day before the vote, that conclusion still hadn't changed.

The conclusion to expel Ryūen Kakeru.

The majority of the class had already made up their minds without any prior discussion or planning.

Ryūen had led the class like a dictator, ruling with an iron fist. However, nobody could say his actions had led the class to success, not even as flattery.

In fact, he was the reason their class had fallen from Class C, dropping them down into last place.

Moreover, many students had suffered from his rule of intimidation and violence. He took advantage of weak-minded students to create a situation where his demands wouldn't be questioned. He was the root of all evil. Many of the students thought that they wouldn't have fallen down to Class D if Ryūen hadn't been around, even if they would've never been able to rise to Class B.

By the third day of the exam, a good portion of Class D had already reached an agreement. Namely, to make sure everyone casts one

censure vote for Ryūen, and to spread out the two remaining votes amongst the rest of the class to avoid concentrating too many votes on another person. This way, they'd be able to ensure Ryūen's expulsion.

Although Ishizaki truly didn't wish to see Ryūen go, he had been put into a difficult position as the one credited with defeating him. He had been forced into the important role of amassing censure votes to work against Ryūen.

When the details of the exam were first explained, Ryūen immediately understood the complexity of the situation Ishizaki had found himself in and the collective stance of his classmates.

And so, he came to a decision. In this exam where the class wanted to kick him out, he wouldn't put up a shred of resistance.

For this reason, he was going to enjoy whatever time he had left until the supplemental exam came to an end.

After all, he still had to think about where he would go and what he would do after leaving the school.

Hence, he didn't want to waste his time sticking around in the classroom after school had ended for the day.

Ryūen left the classroom right away.

Ibuki watched as he did, quietly thinking about how she would pass the time for the remainder of the day.

In the past, Ryūen had often invited her to accompany him, but that hadn't happened for a while now.

A girl approached Ibuki as she stared blankly at the door Ryūen had just passed through.

"Well well, that's quite the miserable look on your face, now isn't it? Are you really 'that' sad to see Ryuuen get expelled?"

"Haa… You again? You really enjoy trying to pick a fight with me, don't you?"

“Not reeeally. I’m just here ‘cause I’m worried about you; isn’t that obvious? It seems to me like you’ve been increasingly less important ever since Ryūen-kun lost, wouldn’t you say?”

The one saying these provocative words was none other than Ibuki’s classmate, Shiho Manabe, a central figure among the girls of Class D.

Ever since enrollment, the two had never gotten along well with each other. Manabe had butted heads with Ibuki more than just a few times, but because Ibuki was heavily supported by Ryūen, Manabe had been unable to complain about her as much as she wanted to.

Inwardly, this had made Manabe extremely unhappy.

Her provocations were, most likely, her way of venting pent-up anger.

“You’re gonna cast a censure vote for me, aren’t you Ibuki-san?”

“Dunno.”

“Just do it. I’m gonna vote for you, so we’ll be even that way.”

“…Huh, is that so.”

Manabe became somewhat annoyed by Ibuki’s indifferent reply.

After all, she really wanted to see her squirm and lose herself in anger.

“Well, isn’t it nice knowing that you won’t be expelled, Ibuki-san? Even if a handful of people cast Ryūen-kun their praise votes, he’s still gonna get like, more than thirty censure votes.”

Manabe was only able to be this cocky because Ryūen wasn’t in the room, but that didn’t change the fact that many of the other students shared her stance on the matter.

Ishizaki got up out of his seat.

The supplemental exam would take place tomorrow, and once it began, nothing more could be done to change the situation.

“Come with me for a bit, Ibuki.”

Ishizaki approached the two girls as they glared at one another.

“…Whatever.”

Despite her unclear response, Ibuki went along with Ishizaki’s request and proceeded to leave the classroom.

For Ibuki, she believed that pretty much anything would be preferable if it meant getting away from Manabe.

“You can act as calm and composed as you want, but know that after Ryūen-kun gets expelled, you’re next.”

Acting as though she was the ruler of the class, Manabe saw Ibuki off with one final provocation.

“So, where are we going?”

Ibuki asked after they left the classroom, with Manabe no longer in view.

“Nowhere in particular. I kinda just wanted to talk to you for a bit about the private points Ryūen-san is holding onto. What happened to em?”

“Nothing ‘happened’ to them, he’s still got them.”

“You still haven’t gotten em? The exam’s tomorrow you know? We’ll lose em all once he gets expelled.”

“And just who was the one who got all worked up about not taking them, again?”

“That’s… I didn’t care much about private points back then…”

“If you want them so badly, why don’t you go beg him for them yourself?”

“I ain’t gonna do that.”

Ibuki spoke sharply because she already knew that this would be his

answer.

“As far as the rest of the class is concerned, you’re the one responsible for knocking Ryūen down a peg. It’d be pretty suspicious if people were to find out that you had been in touch with him. People might even start to question your loyalty.”

For Ishizaki, being doubted by his classmates wouldn’t be a terrible development, given that he wanted to prevent Ryūen’s impending expulsion.

However, that would only put Ishizaki at risk of expulsion in Ryūen’s stead. Moreover, the truth behind Ishizaki’s involvement in Ryūen’s fall from power could be exposed. There was no way Ishizaki would be able to reach out to him.

He was suffering from two conflicting emotions: the desire to save Ryūen, and the desire to save himself.

“I… Dammit, what should I do…?”

“It’s for the best to just let Ryūen be expelled, isn’t it? Even you should know that.”

“Is that really okay? Do you really think we can win in the future without Ryūen-san?”

“He expected us to praise the hell out of him even though he never produced any decent results. His actions were impossible to understand, and moreover, seemed kinda stupid.”

“He certainly took a lot of risks, but without him, reaching Class A is nothing more than a pipe dream.”

Even Ryūen had been wary of Class A’s comprehensive overall power under Sakayanagi’s leadership.

And then there was Class B’s unwavering unity and consistent results under the command of Ichinose.

And furthermore, there was Class C’s Ayanokōji, who had the brute strength to overwhelm Ryūen and an immeasurable amount of

knowledge and ingenuity to back that up.

The difference in power between the classes was painfully obvious, a fact that had left a strong impression on Ishizaki.

In order for Class D to contend with those monsters, it was crucial for them to have a monster of their own.

It was clear that Ryūen Kakeru wasn't the correct student to get rid of during this exam.

"Well, I admit Ryūen's far from normal."

Ibuki had her own thoughts on all of this as well.

For some reason, even though Ryūen had been defeated by Ayanokōji, her own opinion of him hadn't really gone down.

Ryūen possessed a unique something that Sakayanagi and Ichinose didn't.

A 'something' that might even be able to reach someone like Ayanokōji.

At least, that's what she thought.

"Dammit…"

Watching Ishizaki vent his frustrations with a sidelong glance, Ibuki began to think about what she could do for this exam.

Even though Ishizaki was an unpleasant, hot-headed guy, he was still earnestly putting in his best efforts.

And yet, she only thought of protecting herself. Of how it would be safer to just stay silent and let Ryūen be expelled.

Ibuki certainly didn't have as much leeway as Ishizaki.

She knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she was disliked by the rest of her class.

In fact, she knew that if Ryūen disappeared, she would be targeted

next.

There was more to Manabe's statement earlier than mere harassment.

Nevertheless, as long as she stayed quiet this time, she'd survive.

Or perhaps in the near future, another way forward might reveal itself.

This was the main aspect that was preventing her from taking action.

She thought back to what 'he' had said.

『This exam isn't simple enough for you to be able to save someone just because you say you want to.』

'He' had already seen through Ibuki's mindset, her way of thinking.

It was why she hadn't been able to face the situation seriously.

"Hey Ishizaki."

"What…?"

"You don't really want Ryūen to be expelled, do you?"

"…Yeah. I can't even lie about it."

"Yeah."

There was absolutely no way someone was going to receive more censure votes than Ryūen.

"I don't really want to admit it, but I feel the same way. Just remember that after Ryūen's gone, I'm next."

She explicitly laid out the facts.

"I'm going to see Ryūen tonight and recover the private points. I

might be the only one who can.”

Those points would then be put to good use for Class D’s sake.

Ryūen’s sacrifice would be used as a source of encouragement for the future.

“So there’s really no other way…”

“It’s pretty much all we can do.”

Ibuki steeled her resolve.

She would recover every single private point Ryūen Kakeru had.

As long as there was a chance they could benefit Class D, they absolutely needed to be obtained.

Part 1

That night, Ibuki visited Ryūen's dorm room without any prior notice.

The dry sound of her fist knocking on his door quietly reverberated through the chilly hallway.

After waiting for a bit, the door opened.

"You?"

"…W-what the hell are you doing!?"

His chest bare, Ryūen had come to the door wearing nothing but his boxers.

"If I told you I was doing something vulgar, would you bug off?"

"I'd kick you in the nuts and go back to my room without looking back."

"Kuku. I just got out of the bath, come in."

It seemed as though he was telling the truth, as his hair was indeed still wet.

Although she was still wary of Ryūen's teasing, Ibuki stepped into his room.

It was the first time she had done so ever since enrollment.

Contrary to her expectations, the room was decked out with various accessories, giving it a completely different impression than '*his*' room.

"You're not here because you wanted to sleep with me before I get expelled, are you?"

Ibuki had no intention of drawing this out by getting caught up in his teasing, instead choosing to just get straight to the point.

“Your private points. Hand them over.”

“Oh? Aren’t you the one who rejected them in the first place?”

While drying his hair with a bath towel, Ryūen took a plastic water bottle out of the fridge.

Though, rather than offer it to Ibuki, he popped off the cap and took a drink for himself.

“There’s already nothing you can do to survive the exam. In other words, the points are going to be wasted right along with you.”

“I suppose. As it is now, if I’m expelled, they’d all disappear.”

The secret contract he had made with Class A would be terminated, leaving Class D with the short end of the stick.

“So give them to me while you still can.”

“Well aren’t you shameless.”

“It’s what you really want, isn’t it? It wouldn’t have been beneath you to go and waste them all if you really didn’t want to hand them over, but it doesn’t seem to me like you’ve done that. It’s like you’ve been telling us to come and pick them up.”

Ryūen had been quietly keeping to himself over the past several days.

It was obvious that he had used, at most, only a couple thousand points.

“Kuku, well aren’t you the smart one. Whatever, take em. They’re useless to me anyway.”

Ryūen let show a smile as he stood before Ibuki.

He then picked up his cell phone and started tapping on the screen.

It only took a moment. Everything Ryūen owned was transferred to

Ibuki's mobile phone.

"It went through. You've served your purpose with this, Ryūen."

Ibuki attempted to put away her phone away as she spoke, but Ryūen reached out and grabbed her by the arm.

With that, he shoved her against the wall.

"Hey! What are you doing!?"

Ibuki immediately let out a kick, but Ryūen catches it with one hand, stopping it easily.

"I don't dislike that aggressive personality of yours, you know."

"Huh!?"

Ibuki reacted with glaring hostility, unsure about what he was going to do, but Ryūen just smirked and let go of her leg.

It was Ryūen's way of offering her one final farewell.

"You're strong, but if you ask me, you've got plenty of weak points. You can't beat Suzune like that."

"Mind your own business."

"Goodbye Ibuki."

Ryūen turned away, appearing to have already lost interest in the conversation.

He then walked over to the front door to show her the way out.

There was a momentary silence as she put on her shoes.

"Are you satisfied with your time here, at this school?"

Ibuki asked, quietly breaking the silence with her back turned to him.

"Oh?"

“Nevermind.”

The answer was obvious just from looking at him.

Ryūen wasn’t satisfied at all.

As a matter of fact, he was going to quietly leave the school without ever being able to gain that satisfaction.

Ibuki stood up, the cold air from the hallway flowing in as she opened the door.

“Goodbye then.”

With these parting words, Ibuki left, closing the door behind her.

There was nobody else but her in the hallway this late at night.

A huge sum of private points was displayed on the screen of her cell phone.

She felt nothing but emptiness as she switched to another screen.

Ibuki made a phone call as she walked down the hallway.

She didn’t care if the person on the other end was asleep.

If it went to voicemail, she intended to cut the call.

However, they picked up before the tone played twice.

“It’s me. I’ve gotten all of Ryūen’s private points.”

She had finished her task, having reported to the person she needed to report to.

From the other end of the phone, ‘*he*’ responded, stating that he wanted to meet up in person.

“That’s fine, but…”

She trailed off as she thought about how she was already out and about.

After a short pause, Ibuki agreed to his request, resolving herself to head to '*his*' room.

Part 2

On Friday, the day before the supplemental exam, the students of Class B stayed behind after school as well.

The entire class was present.

The one standing behind the teaching podium was not the homeroom teacher, Hoshinomiya, but the leader of the class, Ichinose Honami.

“Everyone, thank you for everything you’ve done this past week. I’m grateful that you all went along with my selfish request.”

After the supplemental exam was first announced, Ichinose had made a request of her classmates:

『I ask that you all continue to get along with one another until after school, the day before the exam.』

It was her one request, one made without any explanation.

She hadn’t gone into any further details about the strategy for the upcoming exam.

Straining the relationship between her classmates wouldn’t do anyone any good.

After all, the fact that somebody would be expelled during this exam was absolutely unavoidable.

Even though the students of Class B naturally felt a bit uneasy about it, they still faithfully honored Ichinose’s request.

They trusted in Ichinose’s words, because they had come to understand over the course of the year that she spoke for the sake of Class B as a whole.

The class’s homeroom teacher, Hoshinomiya, was slightly uneasy as

she listened to Ichinose speak. As one of the teachers who felt that this special exam was unreasonable, she felt guilty about the hardship Class B had to endure. The class was strong and dazzling because they had been able to unite together as one without anyone being expelled. She was worried that, if somebody were to be expelled at this point, it might cast a shadow over the rest of the class.

“I imagine everyone is quite worried, but I’d like you all to feel at ease. I won’t let a single one of us be expelled.”

While Ichinose spoke, traces of anxiety and suspense were held within the gazes of her classmates.

She had given the class good news, but at the same time, she had also roused their suspicions.

“Are you sure, Ichinose? Saying that so confidently…”

Kanzaki expressed his concern. Given the situation, if she was lying just to make everyone feel better, it was probably for the best to stop her now.

“It’s okay, Ichinose. We’re prepared for what we have to do.”

Shibata spoke up as well. Even if Ichinose didn’t have a plan, he wasn’t going to hold it against her.

However, Ichinose spoke once again, reaffirming her certainty.

“It’s fine. Kanzaki-kun, you once told me that if somebody has the power to change things, they’re nothing more than a fool if they don’t make use of it, right? That’s why I’ve been reflecting on what I could do for all of you.”

She was confident that none of her classmates would have to be expelled.

“…Then let’s hear it. How are you going to prevent the expulsion?”

If she couldn’t provide any proof, she might as well have been deluding herself.

“There’s only one way to ensure that everyone survives this provisional exam, right?”

“Yeah, we’d have to use twenty million points to override the expulsion.”

“That’s why I’d like to ask everybody to entrust me with all your private points. You won’t have any spending points until April, but this way, everyone can be saved.”

“But, if I’m remembering correctly, we don’t have enough to reach twenty million, right?”

Shibata questioned, looking around at his classmates, his eyes seeking confirmation.

They had already discussed it several times over, but at the end of the day, you can’t spend what you don’t have.

They were still a few million points short, a disparity that was simply too large to overcome.

“So what? Honami-chan’s the one asking for them, so just hand them over.”

One of the girls spoke up, dismissing Shibata’s hesitation.

Without even bothering with the details, the girls immediately began to transfer their points to Ichinose.

The class routinely transferred a percentage of their points to her every month, so they had all already gotten used to doing it.

“Well, I guess you’re right.”

Shibata agreed and pulled out his cell phone.

Faithfully trusted by her classmates, every single private point Class B held was transferred to Ichinose in no time at all.

The total on the screen of her phone was just shy of sixteen million points.

“Yup, just as calculated, we’re roughly four million points short.”

“Now how are you going to make up for the rest? I can’t imagine that anyone from any of the other classes would be willing to give us so many, not even the upperclassmen.”

Even though he had already sent over his own points, Kanzaki once again pressed Ichinose for an answer.

When Nagumo presented Ichinose with the offer to borrow private points, she had promised not to say anything about the deal to others.

However, now that it had come down to this, she couldn’t simply keep it a secret from her friends.

That was why, the day before, she had gotten permission from Nagumo to reveal everything, with the slight exception of the details about dating.

“From student council president Nagumo. When I brought our situation up with him, he told me he’d be willing to supply the rest.”

“The student council president? Can he even come up with that many points?”

“Yes. In fact, he even showed me how many he has.”

Though, there was no way to be certain until Ichinose actually received them.

“Of course, we’ll have to pay him back afterward.”

“What are the details of the repayment plan? Does the president plan on charging us interest?”

“Would the answer to those questions affect what we have to do?”

“No, not at all. Even if the interest rate is unreasonably high, I don’t think anything can replace one of our comrades.”

Kanzaki agreed with Ichinose without batting an eye.

However, he judged that it was still important to understand the details of the transaction first.

He took it upon himself to ask the questions the rest of the class wouldn't, and Ichinose was incredibly thankful for that.

To her, he was a cherished partner who spoke up on behalf of the class's feelings.

"Our repayment period is three months, and there's no interest."

"Is it really okay for him to not charge anything…?"

In this difficult situation, it wouldn't be unusual for the other party to demand at least some interest.

The fact that president Nagumo was lending them points without any made him seem like Class B's savior.

"Because of this, I feel like I'll be inconveniencing everyone for a little while… Is that alright?"

"Amazing… As expected of Ichinose-san! You absolutely have my full support!"

None of her classmates showed any signs of dissatisfaction.

For their sake, she definitely wouldn't let someone be expelled.

That was Ichinose Honami's resolve to protect her friends.

Part 3

Later that evening, Ichinose called Nagumo.

She was making one final confirmation of everything in preparation for tomorrow's exam.

"Nagumo-senpai, it's me, Ichinose."

"Honami? This is about our little arrangement, right?"

"Yes. I brought it up with all my classmates earlier today, so I thought I'd run everything by you once again."

"The conditions I gave you aren't gonna change. Just scrape together every private point you can get your hands on, including the ones your classmates have. We can't be having you get through this without sharing in the suffering together."

"You're right. I think so too."

He wasn't willing to lend them the points they needed while they still had points to spare for themselves.

This was one of the conditions Nagumo had put forward in exchange for his cooperation.

Nagumo had an enormous amount of private points saved up, with the number nearly reaching ten million.

However, he clearly wasn't willing to lend out all of them. Furthermore, even if he hadn't made this a requirement, Ichinose would have taken the initiative to minimize the number of points she'd have to borrow anyway.

"How many more do you need?"

"4,043,019 points."

“Is that so? It seems that the strain on my budget will be lower than I expected. That said, this will still be putting me at a considerable disadvantage in the exams moving forward.”

“Yes…”

Nagumo was carrying quite the burden.

He would have to take action if one of his classmates faced expulsion in the next special exam.

In which case, it was more than possible he would have the carpet pulled out from under him because of the four million points he was lending out.

Ichinose was painfully aware of how fortunate she was to receive this offer.

“I’m truly sorry for making such a selfish request.”

“It’s fine. It’s quite like you to not want to abandon anyone. But, well, you do remember the other condition I had for lending you the points, right?”

“…Yes. I, uh… I have to start going out with Nagumo-senpai, don’t I…?”

“Yep. I’ll transfer you the private points as soon as you agree to it.”

“…The deadline is tonight at midnight, right?”

“Are you really still hesitating? Don’t you want to avoid losing one of your classmates?”

“Of course. It’s just, I’m a little anxious.”

“Anxious?”

Ichinose swallowed her fears, forcing herself to speak.

“Senpai… D-do you, uh… do you like me?”

“What?”

“Oh no, uhm… I’m sorry for asking something so rude… It’s just, I always thought that going out means you hold those kinda feelings for someone…”

“I wouldn’t have made this a condition if I didn’t like you.”

Nagumo answered without hesitation.

Even though Ichinose was happy to hear his response, she still couldn’t help but feel uneasy.

“If you agree to it, I’ll send you the points right now.”

“Please wait. I… want to think about it.”

“Isn’t that what you’ve already been doing these past couple days?”

Slowly but surely, Nagumo’s deadline was approaching.

“You probably can’t borrow any points from the second and third years, right? Furthermore, the first years are your opponents. It’s even less likely you’ll get any from them.”

Nagumo was well aware that he was the only one who’d be willing to lend Ichinose more than four million private points.

However, he had no intention of forcing the matter.

After all, it was obvious Ichinose would come to rely on him in the end.

“Be careful. I’m a man who’s fussy about keeping deadlines.”

“Yes. I’ll definitely contact you later.”

Ending the call, Ichinose let out a heavy sigh as she leaned against the wall.

To Ichinose, protecting her classmates was her number one priority.

She felt like she should be willing to accept his conditions, given that he was willing to help her get what she wanted.

But Ichinose didn't have any experience with romance or love.

She simply couldn't imagine that it was natural to start a relationship with someone like this.

And… deep down, her heart was telling her it was wrong.

It didn't make sense for two people to go out if they didn't like each other.

It was meaningless if the feelings involved were one-sided.

But, it wouldn't be easy to suggest breaking up once they started going out.

"Haa… I'm indecisive, even though I should've already made up my mind…"

It was just a little after 9PM.

Ichinose had no choice but to answer him within the next three hours.

She let out another heavy sigh.

She told herself that, as long as she managed to put up with it, she could save her classmates.

That it was for the best. That, if there truly wasn't any other option…

But no matter what she told herself, her heart was pushing back.

If she really, truly accepted his condition, it felt like she would lose a part of herself.

And that, was a painful premonition.

"No. Nothing good will come out of this way of thinking."

What good is there in changing your mind over and over again after getting so far?

If negotiations with Nagumo were to break down now, one of her

classmates would be expelled.

“…Alright!”

She patted her cheeks lightly, reinforcing her change in resolve.

“I… will protect everyone.”

All alone, Ichinose quietly smiled, having steeled her resolve.

Part 4

Turning back time to the very day the supplemental exam was first announced, long before Ichinose made up her mind about accepting Nagumo's condition…

Unlike the other classes, Class A welcomed the supplemental exam with open arms.

This was because they had managed to make a decision before any of the other classes.

"The rest is for you to discuss amongst yourselves. Just make sure to come to a decision by the day of the vote."

Class A's homeroom teacher, Mashima, finished his explanation of the upcoming exam.

The remaining class time had been provided for the students to hold their discussion, and Sakayanagi started the conversation without even standing up from her seat.

"For this exam, I think it'd be wonderful if we had Katsuragi-kun take his exit."

Sakayanagi made her nomination without the slightest bit of hesitation.

Katsuragi remained completely still; his eyes shut and arms crossed before him.

"Wha… What do you mean!? That doesn't seem fair!"

The only one to show any form of resistance was Totsuka Yahiko, a loyal follower of Katsuragi.

"Stop it, Yahiko."

And yet, Katsuragi flatly rejected Totsuka's attempts to speak up for him.

"B-but, Katsuragi-san!"

"I fully intend to accept what's coming to me."

"There don't seem to be any objections. Or rather… there doesn't seem to be any room for objections, isn't that right everyone?"

The majority of Class A had already joined the Sakayanagi faction. There were certainly a handful of which who weren't keen on doing so, but they weren't so dissatisfied that they would consider rebelling against her.

In favor of securing a safe graduation for themselves, they would continue to side with Sakayanagi.

Due to his blind faith in Katsuragi, Totsuka was the only one who tried to oppose her.

Such actions were meaningless. Katsuragi understood this better than anyone.

"Well then, let's take a vote by a show of hands. Should you have no misgivings with expelling Katsuragi-kun in the vote this weekend, then by all means, please feel free to raise your hand."

The students of Class A all raised their hands in unison.

Excluding Totsuka, Katsuragi, and Sakayanagi, all 37 students approved.

Mashima quietly looked away, as though he had already foreseen it turning out this way.

"With results like this, it seems that the discussion is over, wouldn't you say?"

"Are you really just going to accept this!?"

"It's fine, Yahiko."

Even though Totsuka opposed Sakayanagi until the very end, Katsuragi didn't even try to speak up for himself.

"The contract I signed with Class D is still in effect. As a result, Class A has been needlessly sending private points to Ryūen every month. I'm simply taking responsibility."

"B-but we got class points because of that, didn't we!? It wasn't a complete waste! Besides, since Class D has to expel someone as well, they might end up choosing to expel Ryūen! If that happens, the contract will be annulled even if we don't expel Katsuragi-san!"

Totsuka frantically pieced together an argument.

"Don't go thinking that you can do anything you want just because you're the class's leader!"

"Totsuka, that's enough."

Totsuka was the only one getting heated, so Katsuragi reined him in for a second time.

His tone, much stronger than before.

"Katsuragi-san…!"

Katsuragi strove to maintain his composure, even though he should've been more troubled than anyone.

Moved by his resolve, Totsuka hung his head and returned to his seat.

"I personally wouldn't mind if he kept going, you know? It was an interesting speech."

"It's fine. I have no objections with the plan to expel me."

"Is that so? Well then, let's act in consideration of Katsuragi-kun's wishes."

After less than five minutes of discussion, Class A had reached a consensus.

The class then proceeded to pass its time as usual, as though the supplemental exam didn't exist at all.

Excusing himself from his seat, Katsuragi made his way out of the classroom to be alone.

Naturally, Totsuka went rushing after him immediately afterward.

"Katsuragi-san, are you seriously okay with being expelled!?"

"…It can't be helped. In an exam like this one, influential students have an overwhelming advantage. Even if I put up a fight, I wouldn't be able to overcome the censure votes I'd get from the Sakayanagi faction."

"B-but, there has to be some students who are unsatisfied with Sakayanagi. If we gathered everyone togeth-"

"You have helped me many times so far, and for that, I'm truly grateful."

"Katsuragi-san…"

"That said, after I'm gone, you should align yourself with Sakayanagi. If you foolishly go against her, her next target will be you, Yahiko."

Katsuragi knew this better than anyone, which was why he wanted to prevent Totsuka from clashing with Sakayanagi.

"Those are the final words of advice I have for you."

"…Dammit…!"

Totsuka, face warped in frustration, could do nothing but frantically nod in agreement.

Part 5

That same day, after classes had ended…

“Let’s head home, Masumi-san.”

“…Fine.”

Sakayanagi stood from her seat and called out to Kamuro.

“It seems that a new drink came out at the cafe in Keyaki Mall. Would you like to get one on the way?”

This weekend, one of their classmates would be expelled.

Furthermore, even though she had personally made the nomination, Sakayanagi’s attitude was the same as usual.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“…Nevermind.”

Kamuro changed her mind, having felt like it would’ve been a waste of time to ask.

Sakayanagi’s cold-hearted, calculating decisions were almost inhuman.

Although, Kamuro was pretty much no different from her, so she thought it would be foolish to point this out.

A phone call broke the silence between the two of them, followed by Sakayanagi taking her cell phone out from her pocket.

With a thin smile, she happily answered the call.

“How are you, Yamauchi-kun? I was just thinking it was about time I

heard from you.”

“Talk about having strange taste in men…”

Recently, it hadn’t been unusual for Sakayanagi to engage in deep conversation with Yamauchi.

They would call each other almost daily, talking excitedly about the most trivial things.

“Today? Oh, that’s no problem, let’s meet up. Though, I have a few prior commitments to take care of first, so would it be alright if we meet up afterward?”

Based on their conversation, it was clear that this was yet another one of those calls from Yamauchi.

“I’m busy at the moment, so I’ll get in touch with you later, alright?”

With that, Sakayanagi ended the call a few seconds later.

“So, it seems I’ll be meeting up with Yamauchi-kun later tonight.”

“You… You’ve been talking with Yamauchi a lot recently. What are you planning?”

“What can I say? He’s caught my eye.”

“Caught your eye…? Do you like him?”

“Would it be strange if I said I did?”

As Yamauchi’s physical appearance came to mind, Kamuro could do nothing but shake her head.

“You’re kidding right?”

“Yes. It’s just a joke.”

“You…”

“I’m training him. To see whether or not I can use him as a spy within Class C.”

“Training him… It can’t be that simple can it?”

“He’s been quite easy to manage so far. Furthermore, since an amusing special exam has just been announced, I was thinking of having him take part in a little experiment.”

Sakayanagi’s words were only half-true.

Even though Kamuro was close, she wasn’t somebody she trusted completely. Sakayanagi had chosen her words carefully in order to hide what she needed to keep hidden.

“Let’s meet with him today. That should give you a rough idea of what my goals are.”

Thinking about what would happen next, Sakayanagi smiled happily.

Part 6

That evening, Sakayangi and Kamuro met up with Yamauchi at Keyaki Mall.

Given the situation, they rented a room at the karaoke parlor in order to avoid attracting too much attention.

“So, uh… Kamuro-chan came along too.”

“Sorry. It’s still a bit embarrassing for us to go on a date alone together…”

“N-no it’s cool, really! I’m just happy to be on a date with you at all!”

Yamauchi put on a desperate smile, trying his best to avoid being disliked.

In all actuality, he had wanted to confess to Sakayanagi had she come alone, and afterwards, they could officially become a couple together.

Even so, Yamauchi forced his feelings aside.

“Yamauchi-kun, will you be alright during this next special exam?”

“Eh?”

“Well, it’d be great if you will be, it’s just…”

Sakayanagi let her voice trail off for a moment.

“If you got expelled, we wouldn’t be able to meet like this anymore. That… That’s the one thing I absolutely don’t want to have happen.”

Even though Sakayanagi’s cutesy innocent acting made Kamuro feel sick to her stomach, she didn’t let the nausea show on her face.

This was nothing more than Sakayanagi toying with him.

Besides, if she were to take each and every one of Sakayanagi's games seriously, she'd probably lose her mind.

"I-I'd hate that too!"

"It's kind of like our feelings are intertwined, isn't it?"

Sakayanagi gently patted her chest with a sigh of relief.

"If there's something troubling you, you can always come to me about it, Yamauchi-kun."

"But…"

"You and I are certainly mutual enemies, but it's different during this exam. We don't have to compete against students from other classes, do we?"

"That's true…"

"And because of that, it may be possible for us to cooperate with one another instead."

"Cooperate…?"

Yamauchi appeared to have had somewhat of the same idea.

"It's just an example, but… what if I used my praise vote on you, Yamauchi-kun?"

Hearing that, Yamauchi gulped in anticipation.

People wanted as many praise votes from the other classes as they could get their hands on.

For the students at risk of expulsion, they were so desperate for these crucial votes that they would stoop to any level to get them.

"A-are you seriously gonna help me?"

"If you're in trouble, I'll gladly cooperate."

Although Yamauchi kept his cool on the surface, her kind words had

impacted him, making him happy from the bottom of his heart.

He had never once spoken with a girl this intimately before in his entire life. After all, it would be embarrassing for her to realize that he had absolutely no experience with love.

“To tell you the truth… It seems like people in my class are pretty jealous of me, and uh, I’m worried that they might use their censure votes on me.”

“Jealousy, is it?”

“It’s because I’m the only one who can meet up with you like this, Sakayanagi-chan.”

“That is true, isn’t it? I’m not interested in other boys at all.”

He couldn’t bring himself to say he was at risk of expulsion because his grades were bad.

Instead, Yamauchi wanted to make himself look good so Sakayanagi would like him more.

“Either way, I understand what you’re getting at, so I’ll give you some secret instructions that will help you out, Yamauchi-kun.”

“S-secret instructions?”

“Yes. Please reach out to approximately half of your class and try to pull them over to your side. Then, you can target somebody else and push for them to be expelled.”

“But, uh… if I did that, isn’t it possible that I might end up getting targeted…!?”

“I suppose that’s true. It’s not like anybody wants to be seen as the leader. After all, if you end up carelessly upsetting the wrong person, you might end up being voted for instead.”

Yamauchi nodded in agreement.

“That’s why I’m going to help you.”

“H-how?”

“There are about twenty people who follow me in Class A. I’ll have all of them use their praise votes on you, Yamauchi-kun.”

“Eh!?”

“A good number of your classmates should also be willing to give you praise votes, right? With their votes included, even if you end up getting more than thirty censure votes, the votes will pretty much cancel each other out. It’s highly unlikely that you’ll be expelled.”

“A-are you serious?”

“Of course. That said, even if you get twenty votes, your safety won’t be guaranteed. That’s why you need to take the reins and drive somebody else into a corner.”

“B-but who?”

“Let’s see… Naturally, you can’t get rid of somebody useful to your class. Masumi-san, does anyone suitable come to mind?”

“…How about Ayanokōji?”

“Ayanokōji…kun, is it? I believe I’ve heard the name but…”

“Oh, uh, he’s the kinda guy who doesn’t stand out at all. How should I explain it…?”

“You can spare me the details. He sounds like he might be the perfect target. You two aren’t particularly close, are you?”

“Not at all! He’s just a classmate!”

“In which case, let’s have him be the sacrifice.”

“But…”

Yamauchi’s desire to save himself was in conflict with his reluctance to sacrifice one of his classmates.

However, needless to say, his desire to protect himself was far

stronger.

“I think it’d be painful to cut ties with a classmate, no matter what kind of relationship you had with them, so I’d try to avoid thinking about it too much. I think we’ve chosen a suitable target, so we just have to go along with it.”

Sakayanagi smiled at him with an expression that seemed to say ‘That way, your heart won’t hurt as much, right?’

“Next Monday, after this exam is over, would you like to meet up again, just the two of us? There’s something I’d like to tell you then, Yamauchi-kun. It’s something very important.”

“!!!”

Yamauchi staggered. Her words dealt a finishing blow, completely enticing him.

His imagination ran wild as he envisioned an upcoming confession of love from Sakayanagi.

For the sake of turning his dreams into reality, Yamauchi would do everything in his power to avoid expulsion, no matter what.

Even more importantly, if he didn’t successfully carry out the strategy she had come up with, it was possible that she might begin to hate him.

These thoughts were the only thing spurring him on.

“So, let’s start out by identifying people who appear to be Ayanokōji-kun’s friends. It’d be best if we could quietly have him expelled without him hearing about it.”

“G-got it.”

“But before that, I have some advice for you, Yamauchi-kun.”

“Advice…?”

“Please don’t tell anyone that we’re going to be voting for you.

There's a risk that your classmates will resent you if you carelessly talk about it."

"That's for sure…"

They would obviously get jealous and antagonistic if they found out that Yamauchi was the only one safe from the exam.

"Understood. I won't say anything."

"Thank you very much."

"But… U-uhm."

"What is it?"

"Uhm, It's not that I'm doubting you or anything, it's just… Are you really going to use your praise vote on me?"

"Are you saying that you want to have something in writing?"

"It's just that I'm kinda worried about it…"

Yamauchi was worried because he lacked confidence in leaving it to a simple verbal agreement, something that was well within Sakayanagi's expectations.

"Do you think that I'm going to betray you, Yamauchi-kun? Even if I wanted to, there's no reason for me to do such a thing. But if you really aren't willing to believe me… let's just forget that this conversation ever happened. If you really can't trust a promise from me, I suppose I'll have to reconsider meeting up next Monday."

"W-wait! I believe you! I trust you!"

When Sakayanagi tried to back out, Yamauchi eagerly attempted to reel her back in.

"I'm sorry for doubting you…"

"It's fine. I understand that you're anxious."

With a gentle smile, Sakayanagi presented Yamauchi with one final

warning.

“That said… Yamauchi-kun, if I catch you eavesdropping on me, sneaking photos, or secretly recording our conversations in the future, our relationship will be over. The two of us will become enemies.”

“N-no problem! I’d never do something like that!”

“Very well. Then, Masumi-san, if you would, please pat him down.”

“Eh? Me?”

“Please.”

“…Fine.”

Despite voicing her reluctance, Kamuro proceeded to frisk Yamauchi.

“It’s getting interesting.”

For Sakayanagi, this was nothing more than a game.

In her mind, the outcome to all of this had already been decided since the very beginning.

After Yamauchi left, Sakayanagi stayed behind with Kamuro in the karaoke room.

“We’re not going home yet?”

It was just a little past 8:00 PM.

The mall was only open to students until nine, and the karaoke parlor was going to close soon as well.

“What do you think of this strategy I’ve come up with, Masumi-san?”

“What do you mean…?”

“Ayanokōji-kun is no ordinary person. You’ve noticed this yourself, right?”

“Well, I know that you’ve been excessively interested in him.”

“It’s something more than that, isn’t it? You’ve been close to him before. You should’ve been able to notice it.”

Although she wasn’t certain about anything specific, he was unpleasant. He seemed like a student who was shrouded in mystery.

That was the impression Kamuro had of him.

“He’s powerful.”

“…How powerful?”

“People like Katsuragi-kun, Ryūen-kun, and Ichinose-san wouldn’t even stand a chance against him.”

“Really? What about you then?”

“Hmm… Who knows?”

“Are you being serious…? I can’t believe you’re saying this.”

Kamuro was surprised. She had thought Sakayanagi would say she could beat him without any hesitation.

“Of course it’s possible that I can beat him. That said, it’s also true that I don’t know exactly what he’s capable of. Well… I suppose it’s a bit different from that. Maybe there’s just a part of me that wants him to be an opponent far outside of even my capabilities.”

It was a mysterious feeling that she had never noticed she had before.

“I hope I can see him take things seriously before I have him expelled.”

It was something Sakayanagi wanted from the bottom of her heart.

Part 7

They had met on Tuesday. The following day, Sakayanagi proceeded to receive phone calls from Yamauchi with updates, as per their recent conversation.

She was in the midst of playing both sides of a chess match in the dorm room while she relayed instructions to him on how to survive the upcoming exam. She picked up a piece and moved it forward on the board.

“Really? That many people have already agreed to vote for Ayanokōji-kun?”

There were twenty-one people in total, an impressive number that had exceeded her expectations.

Yamauchi probably wouldn’t have been able to make things turn out so well if he had done everything on his own.

“Yamauchi-kun.”

“W-what?”

“As I expected, it seems that asking Kushida-san to act as your mediator was the right thing to do.”

Kushida was the type of person to take action with her classmates in mind.

“Yeah, I guess. It went just like you said it would, Sakayanagi-chan.”

Sakayanagi had judged that, if Yamauchi came asking for her help, Kushida wouldn’t be able to turn him down easily.

Moreover, Sakayanagi had also gotten her hands on some interesting information about Kushida.

“When you asked her to help you, did you persuade her with tears like I told you to?”

“I-I wouldn’t do something so uncool!”

Sakayanagi glanced at Kamuro, the look in her eyes saying that he had indeed used tears to persuade Kushida.

“Oh? It seems your negotiation skills handled everything flawlessly, then?”

“I guess…”

“Anyway, I’ll contact you tomorrow about who you should reach out to next.”

“Gotcha.”

Tomorrow was Thursday, and the important decisions would have to be made then.

Sakayanagi would have to decide how Yamauchi would convince these students to join his faction.

After the call had ended, Kamuro spoke up.

“Is this Kushida person really the type who’d help get someone expelled?”

“If someone approached her, sobbing, begging for her help, there’s no way she wouldn’t lend a hand. Be that as it may, it’s important to have a way with words in order to get as many supporters as possible, and Kushida-san seems to have quite the silver tongue.”

Taking hold of her queen in one hand, Sakayanagi looked at Kamuro.

“What do you think will happen next?”

“If it keeps going on like this, Ayanokōji will amass censure votes and get expelled from school… but, if he’s as powerful as you say he is, won’t he do something about it?”

“Even if he doesn’t know that he’s personally being targeted?”

“He doesn’t know about the strategy, though.”

“He’s always on guard. Putting aside whether or not he knows he’s being targeted, if you were to consider the reality of this exam, you wouldn’t be able to rule out the possibility that you may ultimately be voted for. That being the case, you should be putting in the effort to come up with countermeasures ahead of time.”

“…What do you mean by countermeasures?”

“Just prove to everyone that somebody else is a hindrance to the success of the class. Whatever the reason, the more incompetent this somebody is, the better the result.”

Sakayanagi momentarily envisioned the spectacle that may take place within Class C in the near future.

“Yamauchi-kun, for example, is colluding with me to have one of his own classmates ostracized and expelled. If this were to come to light, I imagine that he’d fill the role perfectly.”

“So, what you’re saying is that it doesn’t matter to you which one of them gets expelled?”

With her other hand, Sakayanagi picked up the opposing side’s king.

“No. We have to save the king for last.”

Until the very end, Sakayanagi controlled every last piece on the chessboard.

Part 8

It was Friday evening, the day before the exam, and Sakayanagi had gone to the Karaoke parlor to make preparations for it.

“What’s the situation?”

Kamuro and Hashimoto were present, along with Kitō, for a total of four people.

“It seems that everything was exposed today. Apparently, Horikita-san caught wind of the plan and exposed the fact that I was collaborating with Yamauchi-kun to the rest of their class. I wonder how the information got leaked?”

Sakayanagi leisurely carried a french fry into her mouth.

She intently looked upon her classmates before one of them finally spoke up.

“Sakayanagi, the leak came from Karuizawa. Like I told you before, if you wanted to make sure Ayanokōji got expelled, it would’ve been better to avoid pulling Karuizawa into Yamauchi’s group.”

Hashimoto Masayoshi. He was one of Sakayanagi’s closest associates, and he was someone who had previously taken notice of Ayanokōji all on his own.

Throughout the course of his investigations, he had seen Ayanokōji meet with Karuizawa in secret, so he had previously provided input on what she should do this time.

Even though Sakayanagi had agreed to refrain from pulling Karuizawa into the group at first, she had changed her mind yesterday.

As a consequence, her plan had been exposed to the students of Class D.

“Didn’t I tell you that our first priority was to make sure that Ayanokōji didn’t realize he was being targeted until the exam was already over?”

“Yes. I definitely kept your words in mind. It’s true that Ayanokōji-kun and Karuizawa-san may indeed share an unusual relationship. That is to say, if she was let in on the plan, there was a high chance Ayanokōji-kun would hear of it as well.”

This was the very reason why Sakayanagi had decided to postpone pulling Karuizawa into Yamauchi’s group.

She had let Tuesday and Wednesday pass by, purposefully choosing to pull her into the group on Thursday.

Then, she stepped back and waited to see what would happen next. Based on what had taken place today, it was quite likely that she had leaked the information to Ayanokōji.

“You messed up, didn’t you, Sakayanagi?”

The one who had asked this was none other than Kamuro, who had been silently listening to the conversation.

Hashimoto spoke up too, offering an analysis on why Sakayanagi had made such a simple mistake.

“Karuizawa is one of the most influential girls in her class. If we had managed to pull her into the group, it would’ve pretty much guaranteed Ayanokōji’s expulsion. Forget twenty votes, it’s possible we’d have gotten around thirty. You let the greed get to you.”

“I was well aware they’d carry out a class trial. It was just a matter of time.”

“But, if things hadn’t come to light, Yamauchi might’ve had a way out too.”

Having heard each of their opinions, Sakayanagi couldn’t help but feel amused.

“Should it know that it’s become someone’s prey, even a herbivore

will try to fight for it's life if it comes down to it. But, I find that's exactly what makes it so interesting. Don't you want to see what he'll do in this time he has left? How he'll struggle to stay afloat?"

"You deliberately let Karuizawa leak the information because of that?"

"I was also able to confirm that your information about Karuizawa and Ayanokōji was accurate."

"But Ayanokouji went to Horikita about it, who then revealed everything to the rest of the class. It made it hard to tell what'll happen next. Considering that Yamauchi won't be expelled because of our praise votes, there's still no way Ayanokōji'll be expelled anymore. I have no idea who's gonna be expelled at this point."

When Hashimoto finished, Kamuro spoke up as well.

"Wasn't it also a mistake to make contracts with the ones who agreed to vote for Ayanokōji without getting anything in writing? How many people are still gonna vote for him after what happened today…?"

There'd be a dramatic decrease in the number of censure votes Ayanokōji would be getting, while the number for Yamauchi would only go up.

However, Yamauchi would be getting 20 votes from Class A to escape this predicament.

In which case, it'd be hard to guess who'd end up with the most votes against them.

Having heard Hashimoto and Kamuro's analysis of the situation, Sakayanagi grinned.

To Sakayanagi, the outcome of all of this was obvious.

Kamuro, Hashimoto, and Yamauchi simply couldn't see it yet.

She was reminded of the reason why she had done this in the first place.

Sakayanagi pulled out her cell phone and turned off the power.

After all, she'd receive an incessant, endless number of calls and messages from Yamauchi if she kept it on.

Class A had a lot of praise votes to use during this exam.

Yamauchi probably couldn't help but feel worried about whether or not they were really going to use them on him.

"It seems there's something I had forgotten to tell everybody, a very important story concerning Yamauchi-kun."

With that, Sakayanagi began to tell them about the encounter that she had oh so carelessly forgotten to mention.

Epilogue: “The Dropouts”

Saturday morning, the very day of the exam, had finally arrived.

It seemed that nearly every single class had managed to come to a decision.

Class A had chosen to expel Katsuragi and Class D had chosen to expel Ryuuen.

Class B was moving forward believing nobody would have to be expelled.

Of course, there was a possibility that none of that would turn out as planned. Everyone had a chance to face expulsion.

No one would know for sure until the results were revealed.

Even if a class were to work together to get rid of someone, it wouldn’t matter much if they managed to gather enough praise vote from the other classes.

What was important now, was what you did with the little time we had left.

Even I wasn’t one hundred percent safe.

There were no absolute guarantees like that in this exam.

Even though we were expected to be in the classroom at the same time as always, the exam was going to start a bit later, at nine.

It was currently just half-past eight.

Should this short time-extension be taken as the school showing us some sort of consideration… or was there another reason?

Perhaps it was a trick to keep us on our toes until the very end.

“You really didn’t do anything?”

“What?”

“I’m asking if you really just stayed on the sidelines and didn’t involve yourself in any of this, even though you were in danger?”

“Does it look like I’ve done something?”

“…Not on the surface.”

“There’s your answer. I didn’t do anything this time. Rather, you’re the one who saved me.”

“Then it wouldn’t be funny if you got expelled because of that.”

“Even more so if I got expelled after fighting back like you did.”

This might just be the last conversation we would have as neighbors.

“I suppose.”

Horikita responded dismissively.

Just like this, the class welcomed the exam in silence.

At least, that’s what I thought… At the last moment, something happened once again.

“Please listen up, everyone.”

The one to break the silence was none other than Hirata. Yesterday, he had engaged in an argument with Horikita, but he hadn’t actually done anything more than that.

He had only spoken aimlessly about voting for Horikita.

Of course, it’s possible that some of the students who admire Hirata may vote against her.

However, that would be too weak for a finishing blow.

Within Class C, Horikita’s evaluation was relatively high.

Even though her frank, in-your-face way of speaking is sharp and prickly, it also gave off an impression of reliability.

“After listening to what Horikita-san and everyone else had to say yesterday, I’ve come to a conclusion. The primary focus of this exam… is who we should cast our censure votes for, right?”

Hirata was calm and composed as he spoke.

“Is… Is he still going to say something?”

“Looks like it.”

If he wasn’t, he wouldn’t be trying to say something at the last minute like this.

“What a waste. He doesn’t have a plan. This is just him trying to delay the inevitable.”

No, It’s hard to say for sure…

I could see traces of new-found determination in Hirata’s eyes.

“First of all, I’d like to apologise for what happened yesterday, when I said that I’d vote against Horikita-san.”

Just as I thought, Hirata bowed his head to Horikita to apologize for his rude behavior.

“There isn’t anything you need to apologize for. What in the world are you doing?”

“I decided that you are necessary for the success of our class.”

“If that’s the case, have you thought about who is unnecessary?”

“Yeah. I did.”

Hirata spoke definitively, causing Horikita to falter for a moment.

“…Could you tell us who?”

“I’ll tell you right now.”

Hirata slowly got up from his seat and stood behind the teaching podium, just like Horikita had the day before.

“I love this class. I think that each and every one of you are necessary. No matter what anyone says, or what any of you do, that won’t change. But, I already know that won’t solve anything.”

After all his struggling, this was the answer Hirata had arrived at.

It seemed like nothing had changed from what he had told me yesterday.

“I want everyone to cast a censure vote for me.”

Hirata said what I thought he would say.

“H-how could any of us do something like that!?”

Mii-chan exclaimed, with other girls voicing similar thoughts in quick succession.

“It’ll be fine if I’m expelled. I’m prepared to do at least that much.”

“Think about what you’re saying… Have you gone insane?”

Horikita unconsciously raised her voice, even though, given the situation, it would’ve been fine to let Hirata say whatever he wanted.

“You’re gonna sacrifice yourself just because you can’t decide who to expel?”

“You said it yourself right, Horikita-san? That if a student wants to be expelled, there wouldn’t be anything else we need to talk about?”

“That’s-”

“So I’m volunteering.”

“Nobody in this class actually wants to see you expelled. You act as a mediator to settle the class’s conflicts. This is far too ridiculous.”

“Either way, I don’t care.”

It wouldn’t be wrong to say that Class C was on the brink of chaos.

At this point, there were no surprises about who people would be voting against. The key question had changed from ‘Who would get the censure votes?’ to ‘Who would get the praise votes?’.

Without Hirata, the future special exams would probably be far more difficult.

That’s the risk of losing one of the class’s central figures.

“There’s absolutely, totally, no way I’m using a censure vote on Hirata-kun!”

Shinohara and the rest of the girls collectively begun to speak up to defend Hirata.

Hirata’s heart probably felt that much worse every time they spoke up for him.

“There’s no reason for you guys to stick up for me. I’ve already come to hate all of you.”

His tone was the same as usual, but the words he spoke were cold.

“So please let me make this easier on all of us.”

“I… I’ll vote for Hirata!”

Yamauchi shouted.

“If it’s for Hirata, I think everyone else should vote for him too!”

He then continued to yell things like that.

“I see. This is Yamauchi-kun’s last stand…”

Yamauchi had probably contacted Hirata yesterday and pleaded

about how he didn’t want to be expelled, begging Hirata to help.

That may have been one of the reasons why Hirata had hardened his resolve to get expelled.

Then, after a long silence, Chabashira entered the classroom.

“Well then, the class vote will now begin. Once your name has been called, please make your way to the voting room.”

It didn’t seem like we were going to be voting all at the same time in the classroom.

There was no guarantee that we wouldn’t be able to see each other’s votes. It seemed that the school was doing what it could to ensure the votes remained anonymous.

Now, how would it turn out from here…?

Part 1

Within Class A that same morning, everyone was patiently waiting for the results to be announced.

The outcome had already been decided ever since the supplemental exam was first announced, and there were no objections to it either.

As the bell rang, Mashima entered the classroom to announce the outcome.

He was as calm as always. He didn't have very much of an opinion about what was about to take place.

No, rather, it was more like he was simply trying not to think about it very much.

It had been four years since he became a teacher at Advanced Nurturing High School, and he had seen many students get expelled in that time.

"I'll now be announcing the results of the supplementary special exam. To start things out, the student who received the most praise votes… would be you, Sakayanagi, with a total of thirty-six votes."

"I didn't expect that all of you would vote for me. I really must thank everyone."

She responded with empty words of gratitude. Nearly everyone in the class had voted for her.

"Next… I'll announce the student who received the most censure votes. I'm sure you're all aware of this by now, but the person whose name is called will be expelled. After this, they'll have to pack their bags and come along with me to the staff room."

The classroom was dead silent.

Every single student was quiet as they waited for the name to be called.

“In last place, with thirty-six censure votes…”

He paused for a split-second, and then…

“Yahiko Totsuka.”

He spoke.

The name resounded throughout the silent classroom.

“How absurd! What’s going on!?”

Katsuragi stood up from his seat, raising his voice after the results had sunken in.

“K-Katsuragi-san… Why? Wha…?”

Totsuka looked at Katsuragi with an expression of disbelief on his face as well.

He had received an overwhelming majority, thirty-six, of the classes censure votes, ensuring his expulsion.

Then, Mashima revealed the total number of votes that every student in the class had gotten.

Katsuragi had placed just behind Totsuka with a total of thirty censure votes.

“What’s going on here, sensei? The one being expelled should be me-”

“There haven’t been any mistakes.”

Mashima cut Katsuragi off, answering his question calmly.

A young girl began to speak, as if to shed light on such an inexplicable situation.

“Katsuragi-kun, it seems you’ve been given some praise votes. How wonderful.”

Hearing that, Katsuragi finally understood.

This hadn’t happened due to some kind of mistake. Rather, this was the outcome of one of Sakayanagi’s schemes.

“Wait, Sakayanagi! The one who should’ve been expelled was me!”

“Expulsion? You? You weren’t the target in the first place.”

She responded decisively.

“Stop joking with me. You definitely said you were going to get rid of me!”

“Come to think of it, you’re right, aren’t you? I did say I was going to get rid of you, but… that was just a lie.”

Without an ounce of apprehension, Sakayanagi smiled gently.

“Why… Why!?”

“It’s simple. Totsuka-kun doesn’t bring any benefits to Class A. On the other hand, you’re sharp, and your reflexes aren’t anything to scoff at either. This, combined with your calm head, makes you useful in your own way. This exam is perfect for disposing of somebody unnecessary, so only an idiot would get rid of someone who still has use left in them.”

Katsuragi winced, unable to refute her point.

Although, that wasn’t the only reason why Sakayanagi had done this.

Originally, Totsuka wasn’t the only one who sided with Katsuragi. Even though she intended to mercilessly make an example out of Katsuragi for going against her, Totsuka’s expulsion would have an even larger impact on Class A.

It would instill the idea that, if you sided with Katsuragi, you would be the next to see yourself in Totsuka's shoes.

"Why would you do this in such an indirect way…?"

"Isn't it only natural for someone to do their best to avoid expulsion? There are a lot of praise votes floating around from other classes in this exam. If Totsuka-kun had gone and gathered them from the other classes in order to save himself, I don't believe we could've gotten him expelled."

She couldn't know for sure that another class wouldn't just whimsically decide to save Totsuka.

However, if she singled out Katsuragi from the very beginning, nobody would bother to use their praise votes on Totsuka.

"Thank you for your hard work, Totsuka-kun. Be sure to take care of yourself after you've left the school."

"D-damn…! Dammit! Dammit…!"

Totsuka curled over as if he was about to collapse. Katsuragi couldn't find the right words to comfort him.

Totsuka would have normally been overjoyed to find out Katsuragi wasn't going to be expelled.

But now that he was being expelled himself, that didn't matter anymore.

Instead, he could only feel resentment as he wondered why it had to be him instead of his friend.

If Katsuragi had gotten expelled, Totsuka Yahiko would've been able to stay in Class A. And while he would've been displeased with it, he would've followed Sakayanagi all the way until graduation. And then, he would've become successful in life.

Even though he felt guilty for it, he had already vaguely begun to imagine his wonderful future as a graduate from Class A.

But because of this sudden twist of fate, he had lost everything.

“Saving him with twenty million points… is probably impossible.”

“Correct. Unfortunately, even if we added up all of our points, we still wouldn’t have enough.”

“Totsuka, there’s… no way to overturn this decision.”

The homeroom teacher, Mashima, spoke definitively as he buried the pain within his heart.

“……”

Totsuka was at a loss for words, unable to do anything but nod in response.

“Totsuka, please come with me to the staff room for the time being. I’ll let you collect your things later.”

In consideration of the young man’s feelings, Mashima asked for Totsuka to leave the room.

His expulsion had been set in stone, so staying in the classroom would only serve to hurt him more.

“By the way, Mashima-sensei… Might I ask you something?”

“What is it, Sakayanagi?”

As Mashima began to leave the classroom with Totsuka, Sakayanagi’s voice brought him to a halt.

He instructed for Totsuka to wait in the hallway before turning to hear her out.

“While it’s a shame that Totsuka-kun had to be sacrificed… It has already been decided who’s going to be expelled in the other classes, right?”

“Tentatively. As soon as the results have been finalized, they’ll be posted on the first-floor bulletin board.”

“Then, depending on the results, is it possible that there will be consequences for Katsuragi-kun?”

“What are you talking about, Sakayanagi?”

Katsuragi questioned her, unsure of what she was getting at.

“I’m just asking for future reference.”

For a moment, Mashima, just like Katsuragi, didn’t seem to understand the meaning behind Sakayanagi’s words.

He hadn’t considered the possibility that she was asking about ‘*that*’.

However, upon seeing Sakayanagi’s fearless smile, Mashima changed his mind.

“…No matter who gets expelled, there won’t be any consequences. ‘*That*’ doesn’t work like that. If, for some reason, there were consequences, even you wouldn’t be able to take advantage of it very easily.”

“That’s certainly true. Thank you very much for answering.”

After Mashima left the classroom, Katsuragi calmly approached Sakayanagi.

In response, Hashimoto and Kitō hurriedly got up to obstruct his path in the off chance he resorted to violence.

However, before Katsuragi could say a word, Sakayanagi spoke up.

“There’s no reason for you to bear a grudge against me, Katsuragi-kun. *Somebody* had to be expelled during this exam. Whether it be you or Totsuka-kun, the results must be taken seriously. The fact of the matter is that there was a vote. One in which every student in Class A participated.”

“…I understand.”

Katsuragi hadn’t planned on getting violent from the start. He had only intended to vent his dissatisfaction to her.

And yet, Sakayanagi had put a stop to even that.

“That’s fine then. After all, I don’t want you to hold back our class moving forward because you become consumed by self-despair. However… If by chance you were to go against Class A in the future…”

“I told you I understood. You don’t have to drag anyone else into this.”

“I’m glad to see you’re so sensible.”

If Katsuragi were to bare his fangs at Sakayanagi out of resentment because of Totsuka’s expulsion, Sakayanagi was threatening that she would have someone else expelled next time. Sakayanagi was well aware that, as long as Katsuragi was obedient, he’d be able to contribute greatly to the future success of Class A.

Like this, Katsuragi had given in entirely. Without any means of going against her, he had no choice but to raise the white flag and surrender to Sakayanagi.

“Well then… I wonder how the other classes are doing right now?”

Of course, as far as Sakayanagi was concerned, Class B and Class D weren’t even worth thinking about.

The only thing she cared about was what had happened within Class C, the class that Ayanokōji was in. She couldn’t help but look forward to hearing about it.

Part 2

Back within Class C, the sound of Yamauchi restlessly tapping his foot was extremely distracting.

“Yo, Haruki… Try and quiet down a bit.”

Ike quietly whispered a warning to him.

“S-shut up. I know.”

“Fufufu. At any rate, it seems your defeat is close at hand, wouldn’t you say?”

“Huh? What are you getting at, Kōenji? I’m not gonna be expelled, considering the other options.”

Yamauchi turned and looked at Kōenji with an eerie smile on his face.

“I think it’s fair to say that, out of everyone in the class, a considerable number of students have voted against you.”

Ike and Sudō sat quietly, unable to help Yamauchi as Kōenji fanned the flames. Hirata, however, interjected.

“That’s not how this will turn out. The one being expelled will be me.”

“You’re still going on about that? You aren’t aware of it yet, are you?”

“…What are you talking about?”

Kōenji took out his cell phone with a fearless smile on his face.

“This message was sent to me by one of the girls in our class. It reads: ‘I believe Hirata-kun intends to sacrifice himself and volunteer to be

expelled tomorrow. He might end up saying something hurtful about everyone or make himself out to be a bad guy, but those won't be his true feelings. Please, have faith in him and don't vote against him for it.' It seems to me like it was sent to everyone other than you and Yamauchi-kun."

Hirata approached Kōenji and read the message on the phone for himself.

"Most students would sympathize with you after seeing a message like this. After all, it's not untrue that you've spent this past year taking action for the sake of the class. Wouldn't it make more sense for you to get more praise votes because of this, instead?"

"No way…"

Hirata's plan to get the most censure votes had failed.

Of course, this negatively affected the students most at risk of being expelled.

Horikita quietly turned to me and spoke.

"You're awfully composed. It's almost as if you've already foreseen what will happen."

"You probably know what will happen too."

"Even if I did, I wouldn't sit back and watch so complacently. As long as there's room for uncertainty, there's still reason to worry."

Kōenji cut in, as if responding to Horikita.

"The only one who should be worried is *him*."

Almost everyone in the class shifted their gaze toward Yamauchi, wondering how he would respond after hearing something like that.

Yamauchi slowly stood up and turned around to look at Kōenji.

His expression was one of confidence, one that said he was certain of his chances of coming out on top.

“…Hah.”

Yamauchi laughed at Kōenji contemptuously.

“Go ahead, say whatever you want… The person getting expelled isn’t gonna be me.”

“Oh? And will you tell us why?”

“Fine. I will.”

It seemed Yamauchi couldn’t stand to let Kōenji say whatever he wanted any longer.

“How many of you voted against me? Twenty of you? Thirty? I didn’t specifically betray any of you, yet you guys treat me like this? It’s unreasonable! But that’s fine. I’ll forgive you.”

With a thoughtless smile, Yamauchi approached Ike and patted his hand on his shoulder.

“Sorry Kanji. For making you worry about me so much.”

“Y-yeah.”

Completely unaware of what his friend was getting at, Ike could do nothing but nod.

“There are several people here who might get expelled other than me, right? There’s Kanji, Sudō, Kōenji, and Ayanokōji, but I wonder how many praise votes they’ll get? I’m just *so* worried!”

“From what you’re saying, it sounds as if you’re expecting to get a large number of praise votes.”

“Yep, that’s right. I will.”

“Even if your friends felt sorry enough to vote for you, you’d only get around four or five votes, at best. Are you saying that’s enough to put you in the safe zone?”

“That’s fine. That much would be plenty. Hahaha… Yes, no matter

who you voted for, it's all pointless!"

Yamauchi showily raised his arms up into the air.

"Sakayanagi-chan promised that she would give me twenty praise votes! In other words, even if most of the class voted against me, I still won't be the one who gets expelled!"

Having realized that there was no point in hiding it any longer, Yamauchi decided to show his cards.

"That's why it doesn't matter how many of you voted against me… I'm protected by Class A!"

The votes had already been cast.

It was probably true that Yamauchi had made a promise like that with Sakayanagi.

Assuming he got five praise votes from Class C and twenty votes from Class A, even in the worst-case scenario, he would only end up with a maximum of nine censure votes.

If he was telling the truth, he could hardly be considered at risk of expulsion.

The danger would then shift toward Kōenji and I. Even Ike and Sudō could be in trouble.

"If that's the case, then why do you look so anxious?"

Yamauchi didn't seem calm at all. He was trembling nonstop.

It was proof that, mentally, he was under an incredible amount of stress.

"That's…"

"Since you made a promise with the enemy, you made sure to sign a contract, yes? It's one of the basic fundamentals of doing negotiations."

“N-no, but that’s…”

“A simple verbal promise doesn’t count for anything. Miss *little girl* isn’t *that* merciful.”

“Of course I know that! It’s fine!”

Kōenji’s words simply weren’t able to make it through to him.

Yamauchi could only believe that Sakayanagi wouldn’t go back on her word. There was nothing else he could do.

He must have reached out to Sakayanagi many times last night to ensure everything would still go as he expected it to.

“My my, you must be so reassured, then. It seems that the censure vote I cast for you was meaningless.”

“That’s right, it was meaningless! Meaningless!”

“Be quiet, Yamauchi. I could hear your shouting from out in the hallway.”

Just then, Chabashira arrived.

“I’ve kept all of you waiting. I’ll get along with announcing the results for Class C. Please find your seats.”

The time of judgment had finally come.

Very soon, one student would be expelled from this class.

Would it be Yamauchi, who was telling himself that everything would be okay?

Would it be Sudō or Ike, one of the secondary candidates for expulsion?

Would it be Hirata, who was patiently waiting for the results to be announced?

Would it be Kōenji, who was as inattentive as always?

Would it be Horikita or me, as we quietly watched over the classroom?

Or, would it end up being someone else entirely?

“To start out, I’ll announce the three of you who ended up with the most praise votes. In third place is… Kushida Kikyō.”

Kushida sighed with relief when she heard her name being called.

Even though Yamauchi had targeted her yesterday, she ended up earning quite a lot of praise votes.

If you take into account the fact that she’s adored by her classmates, an outcome like this makes sense.

“Next, in second place…”

Chabashira began reading a little slower.

Even I couldn’t fully predict whose name she would say.

“It’s you, Hirata Yōsuke.”

“!”

The moment his name was called, Hirata shut his eyes and looked up toward the sky.

The disgraceful behavior he showed yesterday hadn’t had any significant consequences.

Hirata worked hard this past year, going through thick and thin for the sake of the class.

He had earned a tremendous amount of trust, especially from the girls in the class.

Even if I hadn’t arranged for Kei to spread that text message around yesterday, his ranking would’ve hardly changed.

“B-but, if Hirata placed second… who placed first?”

Since the beginning, everyone had expected for Hirata and Kushida to get most of the praise votes.

It wasn't unreasonable for them to place second and third, it was just that this outcome meant there was somebody who had surpassed them both.

"…As for first place…"

Chabashira let show a slight smile before she read the name.

I shut my eyes.

"Ayanokōji Kiyotaka."

Everything turned out as I expected.

"W-what!?"

Yamauchi, the one I was supposed to be competing with for last place, was the first to react.

"Aren't you mistaking him with first place for the censure vote!? Sensei!?"

"No. There's no doubt about it. He took first place with a splendid total of forty-two votes."

My classmates all seemed to be surprised. After all, I had gotten more praise votes than there were students in our class.

"You. What did you do…?"

Horikita also couldn't hide her surprise.

"Like I said, I didn't do anything."

Sakayanagi had done all of this by herself.

“And finally, the student who ended up with the most censure votes, with a grand total of thirty-three votes. I’m sorry to say that it’s you, Yamauchi Haruki.”

Now, Yamauchi took yet another heavy blow.

Before he could even make sense of the situation, he was being told he had to leave the school.

“T-thirty-three votes!?”

It pretty much confirmed that he hadn’t gotten any praise votes from Class A.

Second to last was Sudō with twenty-one votes. And coming in right behind him was Ike with twenty.

It was clear that his friends were by no means in the safe zone either.

“No! Why!? Why do I have to be expelled!?”

Chabashira approached Yamauchi and put her arm on his shoulder, but he shook it off.

“…Haruki…”

As his friends, Ike and Sudō could only look away.

They had been hoping that, somehow, Yamauchi would make it through the exam, but the only thing they could do is wait for the results.

And now that the results had come out, they probably realized the sad truth behind all of this.

If Yamauchi hadn’t placed last, what would have happened to them?

“Why, why, why! Why me!! This is such a stupid exam! A complete joke!”

“While you’re free to think whatever you want, the decision has already been made, Yamauchi.”

“SHUT UP!!!”

Yamauchi shouted with every ounce of his being.

He howled, unable to accept the reality of his situation.

“That’s right. Sakayanagi, go ask Sakayanagi! She said she’d have Class A use their praise votes on me! She didn’t keep her promise! Is she just gonna be allowed to get away with that!?”

“Do you have something that clearly proves that she made such a promise?”

Chabashira asked.

“She promised! At the karaoke parlor! I heard her!!!”

“While I want to believe you, words alone aren’t enough to prove anything.”

“Oh my god, why is this happening…!?”

“It’s time to leave the classroom, Yamauchi.”

Despite her instructions, Yamauchi didn’t move an inch.

“Get out of here quickly. Your existence here has already been deleted.”

“I haven’t accepted it yet!”

“So you plan to be irredeemably defective, pitiable, and ugly until the very end?”

After Kōenji’s persistent provocations, Yamauchi finally snapped.

“Grahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!”

He picked up the chair to his desk and charged at Kōenji.

He then lifted the chair up into the air and swung it down, aiming at Kōenji’s head.

If the attack had hit him directly, the resulting injury would've been inexcusable, however, Kōenji wasn't naive enough to be hit by such a sloppy attack.

Kōenji casually grabbed the leg of the chair as it swung down at him and forcibly pulled the chair out of Yamauchi's hands.

"You intended to kill me. You won't have any complaints if I return the favor, yes?"

Yamauchi's face stiffened immediately.

"That's enough."

Chabashira intervened, having sensed the danger behind Kōenji's words.

Following her instructions, Kōenji promptly let go of the chair.

"Don't do any more than this, Yamauchi. For your own sake."

From around the room, Yamauchi noticed the heartbreaking gazes of his classmates, their gazes filled with pity.

And within him, something broke.

"U-uwaaaahhhh!"

Crumbling on the spot, he raised his voice and began to bawl.

"…Leave."

Hearing Chabashira's words for a second time, Yamauchi lost his will to resist.

Part 3

One person was missing from the classroom.

It was the same classroom, but nonetheless, it was distinctly different.

The atmosphere was heavy and everyone was disheartened.

No matter who ended up getting expelled, the situation would've probably still turned out like this.

Even so, considering that someone had to disappear, it's only natural that the decision was made after considering all the potential pros and cons.

To ensure the future success of the class as a whole, who is necessary? Who is unnecessary?

These questions had to be answered.

One person finally stood up from their seat and left the room.

With that, everyone else began to follow suit without anyone saying very much.

After a day off, once Monday came around, everyone would come back to the classroom once again.

And when that time comes, Yamauchi wouldn't be there.

"He's crazier than I thought."

The 'he' Horikita was referring to was, of course, none other than Hirata.

He was sitting motionless at his desk, as if in a daze.

He had been like this ever since Yamauchi left the classroom.

“Hirata-kun… Uhm…”

Mii-chan timidly called out to him, concerned about his well-being.

However, Hirata only slightly shifted his gaze to look at her and didn’t say anything.

How did Hirata feel about this class now?

The answer to that was something only he knew. In any case, there was no other choice for him but to keep moving forward.

The students who couldn’t bear to see Hirata in such a state slowly left and headed home.

Sudō and Ike quietly left the classroom as well.

『Let’s just go home individually for today.』

Everyone in the group quickly agreed to Haruka’s text.

With my bag in hand, I excused myself and started walking to the door.

On my way out, I stopped in front of Kōenji for a moment as he was still in the classroom.

“What is it, Ayanokōji-boy?”

“I didn’t think you’d take action for the sake of the class.”

“Of course. Even I would cooperate with Horikita-girl in order to avoid expulsion.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. Seeing how you were constantly provoking Yamauchi, it seemed to me that you were trying to focus his hatred on you, and you alone.”

It’s obvious that Yamauchi would come to hate his classmates after he’s gotten expelled.

However, since even before the results came out, Kōenji persistently incited Yamauchi more than anyone else in the class, diverting

Yamauchi's hatred solely towards him.

Kōenji had personally dealt with Yamauchi once he had lost all sense of reason after his expulsion was confirmed.

Although, from the perspective of the rest of the class, Kōenji's actions may have just come across as bullying.

"Well now, I have no memory of that. I just wanted to see his ugly figure disappear from as close up as possible."

"Is that so? Then I'll just drop it."

As soon as I was out of the classroom, Horikita quickly followed after me and grabbed me by the arm.

“Ayanokōji-kun. You… How much of this did you anticipate ahead of time?”

Back when Sakayanagi proposed a temporary truce, I was a little more than ninety-percent certain that I didn’t have to worry about being expelled. It’s obvious that, to her, beating me with a surprise attack would be meaningless. If she had lied about the truce in order to force me out of the school, she wouldn’t have been happy about it.

But at the same time, she manipulated Yamauchi and tried to have him get me expelled.

In other words, she had made a clear violation of our truce. That is to say, her actions were contradictory.

To compensate for this contradiction, she would have to do whatever she could to invalidate any censure votes I may get because of Yamauchi.

Namely, to have Class A cast a majority of their praise votes for me.

That way, even if I ended up with twenty to thirty of Class C's censure votes, I'd still end up with a positive number of votes in the end. My safety would be guaranteed. In which case, why would she go through all this trouble? She had probably done so in order to get Yamauchi Haruki expelled. By making him out to be a villain, she had managed to lower his standing within Class C. Of course, I had no way of being absolutely certain of any of this. I couldn't discount the off-chance that Sakayanagi was trying to have me expelled with a surprise attack.

So, I instigated Horikita, using her as a means to ruin Yamauchi. In addition, by letting the class find out that Yamauchi was targeting someone harmless like me, I'd be able to get additional praise votes due to sympathy or protection. Although, ending up in first place was a little bit too much.

"Didn't I say it before? I didn't explicitly take part in this exam."

"…But…"

"I'm heading home."

"Ayanokōji-kun!!"

As if her feet were frozen to the ground, Horikita shouted after me as I walked away.

"It was you, wasn't it…? You're the one who told my brother about the connection between Sakayanagi-san and Yamauchi-kun, aren't you?"

I simply continued walking without giving her an answer and descended the stairway.

On the first floor, I approached the bulletin board.

There was a statement posted that listed the results of the exam for each of the classes.

Class Vote Results:

Expulsions:

Class A: Totsuka Yahiko

Class B: None

Class C: Yamauchi Haruki

Class D: Manabe Shiho

These are the only expulsions.

There will be no changes to the number of Class Points because of these results.

“Yahiko, huh…? I guess she really was lying when she said she’d expel Katsuragi after all.”

Along with who had been expelled, the names of those who had gotten the most praise votes were listed. In Class A it was Sakayanagi, in Class B it was Ichinose, and in Class D it was Kaneda. Kaneda had gotten the fewest, with a total of twenty-seven votes, whereas Ichinose had ended up with a stunning total of ninety-eight. Considering that most of Class A had used their praise votes on me, it was clear just how much everyone valued Ichinose.

Behind me, another student appeared, likely to check the results of the exam for himself.

It was Katsuragi, and at almost the same time, Ryūen showed up as well.

“So you didn’t get expelled either, Katsuragi.”

“…I could say the same to you. Out of everyone, I thought you’d be the one to go.”

“Kuku. It seems like the Grim Reaper has taken pity on me.”

“The Grim Reaper, is it?”

“Don’t worry about it. It’s not like you’d be able to see it anyway.”

With a grin, Ryūen went and looked at the results.

“Though, it seems that Sakayanagi girl did something interesting too, wouldn’t you say? Seeing as that she went and cut down your only supporter.”

While Ryūen spoke cheerfully, Katsuragi’s expression turned into one of remorse.

“You’ve completely lost your fighting spirit, haven’t you?”

“I have nothing to gain by acting out any more than I already have.”

“So you plan to be Sakayanagi’s obedient dog until graduation? What a joke.”

“……”

There was a moment of silence.

However, there was a ghastly expression on Katsuragi’s face.

Yahiko, who had followed Katsuragi through thick and thin, had been expelled.

At the same time, Katsuragi had lost his status as a person who people were willing to protect.

“Hoh? So you can make a face like that too, huh Katsuragi?”

After seeing Katsuragi's expression, perhaps Ryūen had the same impression as me.

"As you are now, you could easily deceive Sakayanagi."

"…Don't joke with me. Putting that aside, what does a bastard like you plan on doing now? Your future at this school was saved by the Grim Reaper. Do you plan on challenging Sakayanagi, Ichinose, and Horikita once again?"

"I'm not interested in something like that."

Ryūen coldly responded without missing a beat.

"The contract I made with you and the rest of Class A is still valid. To put it simply, I plan on sitting back and squeezing you dry as I casually enjoy myself for a little while. I just thought I'd meet you here today to kiss your ass for that."

Apparently, that was the reason why Ryūen had come here in the first place.

After all, from Ryūen's perspective, Katsuragi's expulsion would've also caused the contract to be annulled.

With that, Katsuragi left first and headed back home, leaving Ryūen and me behind.

"Do yourself a favor and come with me for a bit."

Without refusing, I let Ryūen lead the way as we walked around to the backside of the school building.

"Since when were you such a good person, Ayanokōji?"

"I didn't do anything, but it doesn't seem like you're very willing to believe that."

Ryūen should already be well aware of what I did.

"It's not so much that I did anything, it's more like the people who care about you did. They're the ones that did everything."

I looked up at the sky as I recalled the events that had taken place a few days earlier.

Part 4

The lack of an expulsion from within Class B. The fact that Ryūen was still here.

I had been involved in both of these two noteworthy incidents behind the scenes.

It was back on the day when I had met with Hiyori at the library and invited Ichinose to my room.

That night, just past ten, the sound of the doorbell rang throughout my room.

I didn't have many friends who would come to my room to pay me a visit.

I considered whether or not it was Horikita, Kushida, or maybe even someone from the Ayanokōji Group, but in most cases, they would've sent me some sort of notification that they were coming ahead of time.

This time, however, I hadn't been notified of anything. That is to say, the person at the door wasn't anyone like that.

In which case, who in the world had come to visit me?

"…Well this is a first."

As I checked the intercom from within the depths of my room, I saw an unexpected duo displayed on the screen.

They seemed like they were cold as they waited for me to answer the door.

"Well… I suppose curfew is only enforced for the upper floors."

As a general rule, it's prohibited for a boy to enter a girl's living quarters after eight at night.

Well, even if you did break curfew, it wouldn't be a very big deal as long as word didn't get out. Plus, even if you got caught, the punishment wouldn't be very severe as long as it had only happened once or twice. In any case, there weren't any rules that prevented a girl from being the one to come and visit instead.

"Yes?"

After deciding to at least respond to them, I spoke through the intercom. Although, I wasn't exactly welcoming with how I phrased my words.

"…I'd like to talk if you have a moment."

Of the two of them, the boy began to speak, breaking the silence. He leaned forward and peered into the camera and a close-up of his pupil appeared on the screen.

It didn't seem that he wanted to have this talk over the intercom.

"Give me a moment."

I walked over to the entryway and unlocked the door, and upon doing so, it abruptly swung open. The boy, Class D's Ishizaki, entered my room right away.

If one was careless, the force at which the door had swung open could've hurt someone.

"Welcome. You should hurry and come in too. It's cold out there."

"Why do I have to…"

Ishizaki's classmate, Ibuki, voiced her dissatisfaction at my invitation inside.

"Who cares. Just get in here Ibuki."

"Ugh."

Giving in to Ishizaki's prodding, she walked through the entryway.

The cold air was certainly starting to make its way in, so I hastily closed the door behind her.

After thinking about how we would still feel the cold draft if we talked at the entryway, I invited them further into the room.

“So, what do you need from me, so late at night like this?”

At my question, Ishizaki immediately put his hands together and lowered his head.

“Please, Ayanokōji! Tell us how to prevent Ryūen-san from getting expelled!”

“…What?”

These two had come barging in uninvited so late at night just to ask for such a ridiculous favor.

“Did I mishear you? Could you say that one more time?”

“I asked you to tell us how to prevent Ryūen-san from getting expelled!”

It didn’t seem like I had misheard him.

“Just forget it, Ishizaki. There’s no way Ayanokōji will cooperate with you.”

Apparently, Ibuki and Ishizaki weren’t on the same page. It didn’t seem like she had come along to ask for my help.

“That… that’s probably true, it’s just… I can’t think of anyone else other than Ayanokōji who could do something.”

“It’s not like I care. Oh, by the way, I’m only here because Ishizaki forced me to come along with him. He just wouldn’t stop calling me…”

With a sigh, she exasperatedly showed me the screen of her phone.

There were more than fifty missed call notifications from Ishizaki.

“How could I go and ask him all alone!? He’s our enemy!”

“It’s the same even if I’m here with you. What an idiot.”

“Shut yer mouth…”

Ishizaki and Ibuki proceeded to bicker with each other.

“Well, it doesn’t seem like you were sent here by Ryūen.”

If they were acting, it would’ve been quite the show, but that didn’t seem to be the case here.

“There’s no way we’d be here for that. Ryūen-san… wouldn’t ask us to do something like this. You should understand at least that much.”

“I suppose.”

Ryūen had already washed his hands of school matters by making it

seem like he had been defeated by Ishizaki.

In fact, it seemed like he was already fully resolved to leave the school.

Furthermore, even if he didn't plan on being expelled, he wouldn't have reached out to me for help.

There's no way he'd be willing to do something so shameful.

"Are you sure you don't want Ryūen gone? He's done all sorts of things to you."

Ibuki spoke up again, questioning Ishizaki.

"…Well… a lot of stuff did happen… But, it's different now."

"What is?"

"Huh? What do you mean by that?"

"I'm asking you what you mean by 'it's different now'."

"I've come to understand that Ryūen-san is important for the future of Class D."

"I don't get it. Don't you know how much we've had to go through because of him?"

These two had really come all the way here to see me without being on the same page at all.

Or, to put it more accurately, it was as if they were simply unable to communicate with one another.

"First of all, if you're gonna argue, do it later."

At my words, they stopped glaring at one another.

"Ugh. I wanna go back to my room."

However, they still didn't stop quarreling with each other. In particular, Ibuki still had a stern expression on her face.

“Don’t say that. You have to help me persuade Ayanokōji too.”

“I don’t wanna.”

“If you’re gonna argue, go do it somewhere else.”

Seeing as how there were no signs of the conversation moving forward any time soon, I decided to try asking something myself.

“Ryūen isn’t very popular, even in Class C. It’s just an outsider’s perspective, but I’m not exactly wrong, now am I?”

“Well, uh… I guess some people may hate him, maybe…”

“What do you mean ‘some people’? Almost everyone hates him. There’s no point in lying about it.”

“Just shut it! There’s nothing wrong with what I said!”

“Ugh, you’re so loud and annoying. By the way, you’re spraying your spit everywhere while you talk, so stop shouting.”

“I thought I said to save your arguing for later.”

If they kept making so much noise in such a small room like this, the sound would be heard in the rooms around us.

I spoke up again, this time with a twinge of anger in my voice, and the two of them seemed to calm down a bit.

Had they realized that they were imposing on me uninvited?

With this, we were finally able to get on with the conversation.

“It would be unreasonably difficult to stop Ryūen from being expelled.”

I spoke bluntly, without beating around the bush.

I felt like my intentions would come across better that way.

“I guess that’s true.”

Having understood what I was getting at, Ibuki nodded in agreement.

However, Ishizaki didn't seem to be willing to accept it so easily.

"Can't you do something, anything!?"

At the very least, his motivations were genuine. There was no doubting his drive to save Ryūen.

"You really want to stop Ryūen from leaving, don't you?"

"…Yeah."

Other than me, Ibuki, and a few others, most students were under the guise that Ishizaki detests Ryūen.

Of course, that was only a consequence of the incident between Ryūen and I. Even so, it was true that Ishizaki had been tyrannized by Ryūen many times up to this point. I didn't think that he would come and bow his head to me and beg me to save him when he obviously didn't want to.

This was probably also due to the emotional connection he had made with Ryūen over the course of the past year.

However, nobody would be struggling if this exam was something that could be overcome with emotions alone.

Ishizaki seemed to need a simple explanation as to why saving his friend was so difficult.

"There are two primary reasons why I think saving him is unreasonable. This provisional exam will be decided by the number of censure votes being used in your own class. Supposing that you, Ibuki, and two or three others don't vote against Ryūen and cast him a praise vote instead, it's still pretty likely that he'll end up with more than thirty censure votes. Secondly, nobody else actually wants to be expelled."

"B-but, I mean, there aren't very many people that think we can win and move forward without his strength, you know?"

It's true that there were probably at least a few students in Class D who recognize Ryūen's capabilities.

However, by itself, that reason wouldn't cut it.

That just wouldn't be enough of a reason to raise the possibility of getting expelled yourself.

"Nobody wants to expel someone. By targeting Ryūen, the most unpopular person in the class, it would cause the least amount of guilt."

It was just as Ibuki said.

"Even if you couldn't get out of Class D, you'd still wanna graduate safely, wouldn't you? It's not like anyone wants to be labeled a high school dropout."

Chances are, this type of discussion had already taken place within their class, something that was written all over Ishizaki's face.

"If you're being treated as the leader who spearheaded a revolt against Ryūen, then you've probably already heard about this, haven't you?"

Ishizaki nodded. After all, he had probably publicly supported Ryūen's expulsion due to the position he had found himself in.

"I think that other than Ibuki, Albert, and Shiina, everybody's in favor of expelling Ryūen-san."

"So it's checkmate no matter how you look at it, yeah?"

"Yeah, it's checkmate."

I responded to Ibuki's statement with simple affirmation.

"That's why I came here in the first place. You're the one who beat Ryūen-san, so…"

"You want to know if there's a way to stop the expulsion. Before we get to that, there's something I want to ask you."

“What…?”

“Saving Ryūen means that someone else from your class will have to be expelled instead. Do you understand that?”

This was an essential aspect of the exam. I had no choice but to hear how he would answer.

“That’s… That’s true, but…”

“If you really understand, do you have someone else in mind to take Ryūen’s place?”

“N-no, not at all. I don’t think I want to get rid of anyone.”

“Then it sounds like there’s a problem. This exam is designed to ensure that someone gets expelled.”

This wasn’t an exam where you could thoughtlessly talk about wanting to save someone.

“It’s just as Ayanokōji said, isn’t it? If you really want to save Ryūen, why don’t you take the initiative and nominate yourself? If you ask everyone to vote for you instead, you might be able to save him.”

Her cold-hearted idea was pretty much the same as abandoning Ishizaki, but, realistically speaking, it was probably the best option he had available.

Ryūen had accumulated a lot of hatred from his classmates. Even though he was talented enough to think of courageous, clever schemes that an ordinary person couldn’t possibly come up with, once you consider that the class had fallen down to Class D under his leadership, the fact that he was getting cast aside was simply inevitable.

“There’s… really no way to prevent anyone from being expelled?”

“That was everybody else’s initial question too. In the end, they all gave up on trying to think of a solution.”

“…He’s right.”

Ibuki let out a short, dejected sigh.

Rather than bothering to reach out to me for help, Ibuki had understood that it was unreasonable from the very beginning.

“As I said before, this is a complete waste of time. We can’t change Ryūen’s fate.”

“Dammit…!”

Consumed with frustration, Ishizaki punched the wall beside him.

“I think Ryūen had planned on spending the next three years without doing anything. But, he probably changed his mind as soon as he heard about the supplemental exam. He probably thought that he had no other choice but to get expelled. That’s why he decided to quietly sit back and wait for the exam to finish without saying anything, isn’t it?”

Ishizaki didn’t seem to think that Ryūen was doing it as a noble act of self-sacrifice either.

Ryūen simply wasn’t bothering to resist what was coming to him.

“You have to consider Ryūen’s feelings. It’s your duty as someone who follows him.”

“I, I…”

Ishizaki clenched his fists, filled with regret.

He really wants to save Ryūen, huh?

No matter how many enemies you have, it’s not a bad thing to have friends who care about you.

He may not admit to it, but Ryūen has some good friends.

An idea started to take shape in my mind.

However, there were a few things that needed to happen before it could be carried out.

“If I had one piece of advice for you…”

“What is it!? It doesn’t matter what it is, just tell me!”

Ishizaki lurched forward, desperately reaching out for any glimmer of hope he could.

But, unfortunately, those hopes of his weren’t going to last for long.

“As things are now, Ryūen’s private points will disappear along with him. If he’s been receiving points from Class A this whole time, then he’s ought to have saved up a least a couple million points by now. Right?”

“Yeah. As long as he hasn’t used them, he should have around that much.”

“There’s no guarantee that his private points will be transferred or distributed amongst his classmates if he’s still holding onto them when he gets expelled. That being the case, you should transfer all of his points elsewhere before his expulsion is set in stone. They’ll be useful for Class D later on.”

If the points were distributed amongst Class D, they would lose their value as a lump sum. It would be better for them to transfer everything into their own pockets now.

I was certain that Ryūen would at least agree to that.

“T-this isn’t what I wanted to hear from you! I want to know how to save Ryūen-san!”

“Give it up Ishizaki. There’s no point in saying any more than this.”

Ibuki reprimanded Ishizaki with a light kick before turning to me and continuing.

“That said, Ayanokōji. I’m not gonna go and pick up the points Ryūen saved up.”

She spoke definitively. Instead of going to Ryūen and begging him for the points, she would rather give up on them altogether.

“Is that so? What about you, Ishizaki?”

“I won’t either!”

They seemed to share the same stance on the matter, although with slightly different reasons behind it.

They were resolved to the idea that, if Ryūen was going to leave the school, then his points would go along with him.

No, it wasn’t due to something as praiseworthy as resolve.

“It’s a pity, but the two of you can’t save Ryūen.”

“!”

Ishizaki looked at me, his expression stuck somewhere between anger and regret.

“Listen carefully. The only thing you two can do now is retrieve Ryūen’s private points. This exam isn’t so simple that you can save someone just because you want to.”

“Don’t you fuck with me! You want me to take the points from Ryūen-san and peace out? There’s no way I could do that!”

Ishizaki raised his fist, but Ibuki immediately reached out and restrained him.

“I said to stop this shit, Ishizaki. This guy may look like an ordinary person, but he’s really nothing more than a nasty monster.”

“Even if I’m no match for him, I’ll at least get one hit in!”

“Get over it.”

Ibuki then smacked Ishizaki on the head.

“We came here and asked Ayanokōji for something completely unreasonable. He didn’t even say anything wrong, and yet here you are, lashing out at him for it. Could you stop being such a humiliation?”

“Urgh…”

Ishizaki had let the blood rush to his head.

It seems difficult for him to stay composed when it comes to Ryūen for some reason.

Neither of them seemed to have any intention of doing anything. Millions of points, completely free for the taking, were simply going to disappear. If they were thinking about the future of Class D, those points were something that they had absolutely no reason not to get their hands on.

If Ibuki and Ishizaki, Ryūen’s closest friends, didn’t want it, then there’s nothing that could be done about it.

“Well, I had really wanted to see the strength of your resolve a bit more, but…”

“…Huh? What do you mean by that?”

“It has nothing to do with you two anymore. After all, you guys aren’t even willing to recover the private points from Ryūen.”

With that, I ended the conversation. However, I was somewhat convinced that Ibuki would get the private points from Ryūen nonetheless.

Part 5

At just past ten on the night before the exam, my phone rang.

[It's me. I've gotten all of Ryūen's private points.]

Ibuki spoke, stating the bare minimum and nothing else.

"It's a good thing you figured out my contact information, isn't it?"

I tried questioning her, but Ibuki remained completely silent.

I remembered that I had given Shiina my number, so she had probably gotten ahold of it through her.

"Hmm. So, you've gotten ahold of the points?"

Although I had expected her to make a move, this was pushing it until the last minute.

"Can you grab Ishizaki and come to my room right now?"

[Eh? Right now?]

"Is that a problem? I have something to discuss with you about the points you've gotten your hands on."

[Not exactly, it's just… No, I'll be there.]

With those few short words of consent, Ibuki said she would get in contact with Ishizaki right away and then ended the call.

The two of them showed up at my door less than ten minutes later. Did they have some sort of premonition that something important was about to happen?

Just like that, Ishizaki and Ibuki immediately stepped into my room.

"How many points did Ryūen have?"

“A little more than five million.”

“That’s plenty. If there weren’t enough, I’d have to do some last-minute preparations to make up for the rest.”

As I expected, there wasn’t any evidence that Ryūen had used them for himself.

“What are you talking about? What are you doing?”

Ishizaki didn’t seem to have any clue where I was going with this.

On the other hand, Ibuki had already resolved herself, so she wasn’t lagging behind as much.

“You’re going to use these to do something, aren’t you?”

“Correct.”

“He’s gonna use them…?”

“These private points will be used for one thing and one thing only. Saving Ryūen.”

“N-no wait a second. Don’t we need twenty million points in order to do that?”

No matter how Ishizaki looked at it, there simply weren’t enough points to do that.

“Before I get into that, I have something to ask you. Ishizaki. Are you prepared to take responsibility for this?”

“W-what’re you getting at all of a sudden? Prepared to take responsibility for what…?”

“Saving Ryūen means that you have to abandon someone else. I told you this before, didn’t I?”

“…Yeah.”

Despite being a bit flustered, Ishizaki nodded in agreement.

“I’ve resolved myself.”

“Is that so? It’s nice to see you’ve made up your mind. So who will it be?”

“Who…”

It seemed that Ishizaki hadn’t decided on who would be taking Ryūen’s place yet.

“If you haven’t decided, I can decide for you if you want. It’d be easier to get rid of any feelings of guilt that way. Of course, if you think that I’d carelessly get rid of an important member of your class, you don’t have to listen to me at all.”

“P-please hold on. Let me think about it for a bit…”

“There’s no time.”

“I-I’ll make the decision quickly.”

Despite saying that, if he could make the decision quickly, he wouldn’t be having such a hard time in the first place.

“Hold up. I don’t care who we get rid of, but what’s the plan here? You said you were gonna save him with the points, but aren’t we short by like fifteen million?”

Ibuki cut in, and her irritation was understandable.

Be that as it may, I had my own circumstances to consider as well.

“If you want to prevent Ryūen’s expulsion, you need to decide on who will take the fall instead.”

We would talk about the plan in detail afterward.

“For example, how about the troublemakers in your class?”

While I felt bad that Ibuki was dissatisfied with not getting an answer from me, I moved the conversation forward.

“Troublemakers… Well, I guess there’s me and Komiya, and out of

the girls, there's Nishino and Manabe."

"Honestly Ishizaki, as far as Ryūen's safety is concerned, I don't think it's a very good idea to get rid of somebody like you who understands the importance of Ryūen's presence in your class. If there's another exam similar to this one in the future, there's no guarantee Ryūen will be able to make it through that one either."

Ishizaki seemed to agree with my logic.

"So either Nishino or Manabe…"

Ishizaki listed two names, both of whom I was familiar with. Manabe, in particular, was the student I had been thinking of expelling.

Either way, he was the one who had to make the final call.

I intended to respect his decision, regardless of who he ended up choosing.

"Whether it's one of them, or someone else, the decision is entirely up to you."

Ishizaki was also aware of what had taken place between Manabe and Kei during the Cruise Ship Special Exam. If that incident had even the slightest influence on his considerations, in all probability, he would choose to get rid of Manabe.

He was searching for flaws. Searching for some sort of justification where he could throw up his hands and say she had brought this upon herself. Manabe had put her hands on Kei, and by doing so, had brought unnecessary trouble upon her class.

Gradually, Ishizaki would begin to think that expelling Manabe wouldn't be too unreasonable.

As far as Kei was concerned, even though she had already put the incident behind her, Manabe's presence would always be a constant source of uneasiness. Resolving this issue would be enough to allow Kei to relax a little more. Additionally, if I were to have Kei presume that I had been responsible for the expulsion, her confidence in me would also increase yet again.

However, Ibuki unexpectedly spoke up just as Ishizaki was finalizing his decision.

“Is it fine if I make the choice?”

“Eh? You want to?”

“Yeah. There’s someone I want gone.”

“Who?”

I asked without waiting for Ishizaki’s response.

“Manabe. It’s just my personal preference though.”

“And is it alright to make the decision based on that alone?”

“I don’t have any problems with it. Are you saying I should?”

With a single look at Ibuki’s eyes, I understood immediately. She didn’t have even the slightest bit of hesitation.

“If Ishizaki has no objection to it, then it’s settled. That said, there are no guarantees that everything will work out. By preventing Ryūen’s expulsion, the person who ends up with the second most censure votes will be expelled. Now, the overall goal is to reduce the possibility that that person will end up being one of you two. There isn’t very much time left.”

“I get it… I’ll tell the guys that there’ve been some changes and that they should use one of their votes on Manabe. I think they’ll agree to it if I tell them that the plan is to scare her by giving her the second most censure votes.”

“That’s not a bad idea.”

I approved of Ishizaki’s idea.

As long as they were under the impression that Ryūen’s expulsion was set in stone, the rest of his classmates wouldn’t particularly care about who they used the other censure votes on.

“…Well, I might be in trouble here though.”

“Hmm? What do you mean, Ibuki?”

“Manabe and her friends will probably vote for me along with Ryūen. It really doesn’t look very good for me.”

“W-wait. Are you being serious?”

“Even you should know that Manabe and I don’t get along very well, right?”

“That’s, well, that’s true but…”

Ishizaki trailed off, shaken from his inability to wrap his head around the conversation.

“It sounds like you’ve already steeled your resolve, Ibuki.”

Of course, if Manabe didn’t get expelled, Ibuki wouldn’t have any other option but to resign herself to her fate.

“It might be a good idea to consult with Hiyori about it.”

“With Shiina?”

“She might be able to help you with this. I think it’d be fine for you to contact her and tell her you want to concentrate the censure votes on Manabe in order to save Ryūen.”

“…Fine.”

With a nod, Ibuki promptly sent a text message to Hiyori.

“You’re in touch with Shiina, Ayanokōji? I don’t think she’d be on board with the plan to expel Manabe.”

“She just happened to tell me her thoughts about this exam.”

While Hiyori may be a pacifist, she also has a strong desire to respect the wishes of her class.

“She told me she’d cooperate as long as it was for the sake of the

class; since she thinks that Ryūen is important for Class D, I'm sure she'll choose to lend a hand."

We would control their classmate's votes as much as possible, reducing the praise votes and increasing the censure votes for Manabe.

Conversely, we'd increase the praise votes and decrease the censure votes for Ibuki.

That way, the disparity between Ibuki and Manabe would be closed in one fell swoop.

"Well then, tell us your plan. How are we saving him with only five million points?"

Ibuki stared at me, the look in her eyes telling me to speed things up.

I took out my phone and sent a text message to a certain someone.

It was marked as read almost immediately, with the person responding shortly thereafter, saying they would come to my room.

There were less than two hours remaining until the time limit.

It was fortunate that this person had the patience to wait until now.

"What are you doing?"

"Somebody's going to pay us a visit soon. They'll be the secret weapon that'll stop Ryūen's expulsion."

"The secret weapon… that'll stop the expulsion?"

It didn't seem like they would believe me with words alone.

A few minutes later, my doorbell rang, increasing Ibuki and Ishizaki's skepticism even more.

"Is it alright for this person to see us with you?"

"Don't worry about it. Provided that you get your stories straight right now."

In the brief period before the visitor came in, I instructed them on what exactly they needed to say.

Part 6

“Pardon the intrusion～”

Naturally, Ibuki and Ishizaki were surprised upon seeing the visitor who had appeared before us.

They had probably never imagined that they would meet this person here.

“Seriously…?”

“Woah.”

“Oh! I definitely thought there might’ve been someone else here too… Good evening.”

“G-good evening.”

For some reason, Ishizaki had become a little flustered.

The person who had come to my room was none other than Ichinose Honami.

And currently, she was sitting together with Ibuki and Ishizaki from Class D.

Having seen Ichinose, Ibuki finally seemed to understand the big picture of what was going on.

“We’ve got matching interests, don’t we Ichinose?”

“It sure looks like it, Ibuki-san.”

“Huh? What do you mean, Ibuki?”

Ishizaki tilted his head to the side, still unable to put all the pieces together.

“Ishizaki. Nobody’s crazy enough to actually want to save Ryūen. Even if, hypothetically speaking, someone were to show up and say they’d help vote for him, there’s no way to know whether they’d really stick to their word or not. Although… There are exceptions to that…”

“I-Is that so… Then, does that mean Ichinose and everyone in Class B are gonna…!?”

Finally, everything clicked, and Ishizaki seemed to understand what was about to happen.

“Yup. I’ll appeal to everyone in Class B and ask them to cast every single one of our forty praise votes for Ryūen-kun. In return, Ibuki-san will cover the private points we’re missing.”

It was a sure-fire strategy that could only be used once.

There was Ichinose, who had the intuition to stockpile her classmate’s private points ever since the first day of school, and there was Ryūen, who had continued to hoard private points because of the contract he had made with Class A.

It was the ultimate power play that could only be put into action because of the circumstances surrounding these two specific people.

“If you two joined forces, no one will be expelled from Class B and Ryūen won’t have to leave Class D.”

No matter what, Ryūen would only end up with a maximum of thirty-nine censure votes.

With the protection of Class B, that outcome would be eliminated completely thanks to the praise votes he would get.

Ibuki and Ichinose looked each other in the eye.

When two people aren’t usually involved with one another, there’s no reason for them to enter into a relationship built on trust like this.

However, by facing each other eye to eye, it’s possible to determine whether or not they’re trustworthy, at least to a certain extent.

After a moment, Ichinose shifted her gaze away from Ibuki and looked at me.

“With twenty million points, I’ll save one of my classmates… Right?”

Leaving me with that question, she then turned her gaze back to Ibuki.

“What will you do, Ichinose? It’s up to you to decide whether you accept it or not.”

I spoke up, responding to her uncertainty. She had the right to choose the outcome for herself.

After all, she still had the option to reject Ibuki’s proposal and borrow the points from Nagumo instead.

“I’ve made up my mind. As long as Ibuki-san and Ishizaki-kun are alright with it, I’m willing to do what I can.”

“Are you really fine with that?”

“Yes. I’ve been able to make sure that their sincerity is real.”

“You’re an idiot, aren’t you Ichinose?”

“Eh!? Ibuki-san!?”

“Even though all sorts of cruel rumors were going around about you, you still chose to save up all those points. I can’t believe you’re gonna throw ‘em all away for something like this.”

“Well, I can just save up the points all over again. It’s clearly not impossible to accumulate close to twenty million points in just a year. Besides, I don’t think you’re in any position to say that, Ibuki-san. You could just pocket those five million points for yourself right now, but you’ve decided to use them all for Ryūen-kun’s sake instead.”

Ibuki quietly looked away without giving her a direct answer to that.

“You and I are different. Besides, someone else’s gonna end up bawling their eyes out as they pack their bags in Ryūen’s place. In

fact, that person could just as well end up being me."

"But you're still saving Ryūen-kun, aren't you?"

"It… It just pisses me off that he's running away before I can pay him back for this stupid loan I took from him, that's all there is to it."

Ibuki would provide salvation to Ichinose, fully prepared to face the potential disdain from her classmates.

And just like that, Ibuki transferred the predetermined amount of private points to Ichinose.

"Confirm everything on your end."

"Will do."

Ichinose immediately took a look at her points, checking to make sure she had received the points.

"Thank you. It arrived beautifully."

She showed the number on her phone, proving to all of us that she had exactly twenty million points in her account.

"I'll be acting as a witness to this negotiation. I'll have you all know now that I've also been recording the contents of this conversation."

Out of the interest of fairness, I took out my cell phone.

"Ibuki is offering about four million points. In return, Ichinose and the rest of her classmates will cast their praise vote for Ryūen, for a total of forty votes. If there is a breach of this agreement…"

"I wouldn't have fulfilled my end of the deal, so I'd take the initiative and drop out school myself."

Of course, none of us actually thought that something like that would happen.

In practice, the school would also take record of any transactions that consisted of a large number of points, so if Ichinose went against her

word, it wouldn't be surprising if the transaction was determined to be fraudulent with that alone.

However, Ibuki and Ishizaki knew they were making a deal with none other than Ichinose Honami herself, so they probably felt like they could entrust it to her safely.

This was the story of the events that had taken place between Ishizaki, Ibuki, Ichinose, and myself.

Part 7

The backside of the school building was quiet.

“You claimed that it would’ve been easy for you to avoid expulsion if you took things seriously. It was because you knew you could’ve done it this way, wasn’t it?”

“Sure. I knew that Ichinose chick was saving up her points. She goes around acting like such a good-natured person too. She never seemed to like me much, but I still thought there was room for negotiation. That said, I was certain Ibuki didn’t have the wit or skill to negotiate with Ichinose using the points, so I felt pretty comfortable leaving them with her, it’s just… I didn’t think you’d get involved in it.”

“Ibuki and Ishizaki just happened to ask me for help, so I made use of them for what I could. After all, as far as I was concerned, this was nothing more than a great opportunity for me to build trust with Ichinose. If I had them go to you directly, you would’ve seen through the plan. I can’t imagine you would’ve given Ibuki the points in that case.”

“You made the right choice not to explain anything to her then.”

If I had explained everything to her, Ryūen would’ve gotten suspicious and seen through what I was doing behind the scenes.

“Were you the one who targeted Manabe?”

Considering that Kei had once been the target of Manabe’s bullying, it was only natural for him to reach that conclusion.

“No, that was just a coincidence. You know that she was on bad terms with Ibuki too, right?”

“I see. So she made the big decision, eh? Manabe ended up miserably bawling her eyes out.”

I could vaguely imagine what her reaction must've been like after hearing her name called.

"So you're sayin' I was saved by Ishizaki and Ibuki, huh? What an annoying gift they've given me."

"I guess."

I wasn't going to delve any further into this. If Ibuki and Ishizaki hadn't visited my room that day, I would've probably brought up my plan with Hiyori instead.

Then, I would've had her collect Ryūen's private points and do the same thing I had Ibuki do.

I had done all of this in order to have Ichinose owe me a favor. At the same time, I didn't want Ryūen to be expelled for some reason I couldn't quite put my finger on.

I had carried these complicated thoughts with me throughout the entire exam.

"What are you gonna do if there's another exam like this one later?"

"Kuku. Who knows?"

He didn't say that he *wouldn't* do anything.

Among other things, Ryūen probably felt at least somewhat thankful for what Ishizaki and Ibuki had done.

Things might become much more interesting if Ryūen ends up making a comeback in the not-so-distant future.

Of course, whether or not that would happen would be entirely up to him.

My phone began to ring. I took a look at the caller ID to find that it was none other than Ichinose.

Having noticed what was happening, Ryūen turned around and walked back into the school building without saying another word. I

answered the call and spoke.

“It seems Class B made it through the exam without losing anyone.”

[Yup. Kanzaki-kun volunteered himself to be the one everyone voted against. Once we did, it was announced that he’d be expelled once the results came back. After that, I paid the full twenty million points and negated his expulsion. There were some difficulties, but everyone in Class B managed to get through the exam safely.]

“Is that so? The price you paid wasn’t exactly cheap.”

Although it was only for the time being, Class B was now poorer than Class D.

Points would be redistributed again in April, but daily life was going to be quite tough for them until then.

Additionally, once the second year begins, having private points readily available might be important.

Though, there was no need to look into that at this point in time.

[We’ve lost our private points, but we can always make them back again. But, if we had lost even a single person, there would’ve been no way to get them back.]

Ichinose spoke without any indecision in her voice. It seemed as though I had said something unnecessary.

It was clear that she had set her mind on graduating together with every single one of her precious classmates.

[Ryūen-kun might not be satisfied with this, though. It seems that Manabe-san ended up being expelled in his place.]

I decided not to mention that I had just seen Ryūen a few moments ago and simply ignored the first part of what she had said.

“Were you close with Manabe, Ichinose?”

[Not exactly. We’ve only ever spoken once or twice, I guess. It still

feels kinda lonesome though. Class A's Totsuka-kun and Class C's Yamauchi-kun are also gone…]

She probably hadn't been able to make sense of it all yet.

[I wonder if somebody's gonna have to leave like this again at some point?]

Ichinose pondered uneasily.

"Maybe."

People you had grown accustomed to seeing every day, suddenly disappearing.

"You would just have to keep fighting, wouldn't you?"

[Yup. I'm gonna rise up to Class A together with all my friends and graduate.]

Before today, there were probably still some people who thought that Ichinose was a hypocrite.

However, with this, that impression would be gone.

No matter what, Ichinose would fight to the bitter end in order to protect her class.

[…Thank you so much, Ayanokōji-kun. If you weren't here, I…]

"Would've started dating Nagumo?"

[…Yeah.]

Ichinose responded, affirming my answer.

[I know it's stupid of me, it's just… I kept trying to convince myself that it would've been a small price to pay as long as I saved my classmates. But… once I realized that I didn't have to go through with it, I felt relieved from the bottom of my heart.]

She seemed to let out a deep sigh of relief as I could hear the sound of it from the other end of the phone.

[I think I definitely would have regretted it at some point.]

With that, Ichinose let out a laugh.

“If neither the student council president or I were here, what would you have done instead?”

[…Do you have to ask that?]

“I’m curious. There’s no way you haven’t thought about it, right?”

[Yeah, I had two plans. The first was that I would leave the school myself.]

As I had thought, Ichinose had also considered sacrificing herself.

[But, I didn’t really think that would be the choice to make. As a student of this school, I wanted to stay and fight to the bitter end.]

In which case, that would mean her other plan would’ve been her first choice.

[The other plan was to… hold a lottery.]

“I see…”

It was a simple enough plan that anybody could’ve thought of, but it would never work unless everyone agreed to it.

“Was everyone in Class B prepared to draw lots like that?”

[Yup, we had already discussed it. If we hadn’t come up with a way to avoid the expulsion by the day of the vote, we would’ve drawn three random names in a lottery. We didn’t bother talking about who the praise votes would go to and just decided the rest would play out on its own.]

It was the only way to judge all the students equally, without considering their individual strengths and weaknesses.

Even if Ichinose had been selected, the votes against her would’ve probably been canceled out by praise votes. Although, everyone

would've probably been fine with that anyway.

"That would've been about as fair as you could've made it, but it would've never happened in the other classes."

The more outstanding students definitely wouldn't agree to a plan like that.

[It's not like anybody actually wanted to be expelled, but nobody wanted to see our friends disappear either. Once I explained this to everyone, they agreed to the plan.]

Class B was probably only able to accomplish a feat like that because they had an absolute leader like Ichinose.

"I'm impressed."

Despite the fact that it wouldn't be communicated over the phone, I lowered my head slightly as a show of respect to Ichinose.

In and of itself, her plan wasn't particularly extraordinary.

It was simply impressive that she had created an environment where a plan like that could be executed in the first place.

[Alrighty, well, I'll talk to you later. Thank you once again, Ayanokōji-kun.]

"I was just the middleman. If you're going to thank anybody, you should thank Ryūen and his friends."

Part 8

Afterward, I found out that I had received an email on my phone.

“Sakayanagi, huh?”

I didn’t know how she found out about my email address, but I figured I might as well go and meet up with her.

I had thought that she would come and see the results on the bulletin board, but…

As per Sakayanagi’s message, I headed toward the special building where she said she’d be waiting.

Even though it was almost past the time she had requested for us to meet, I figured that if I left now, we’d still be able to run into each other.

Once I got to the special building, I immediately went to the place where we had talked last time.

“So you finally came.”

“Seeing that you have my email address, you must have gotten your hands on my phone number as well.”

“I didn’t call because I didn’t think it would be much of an issue if I didn’t get to see you today.”

“What do you want?”

“For the time being, there’s something I’d like to explain to you.”

As she spoke, she leaned forward a little bit on her cane, shortening the distance between us.

“Since I had done something a little bit disorderly, I thought you

might be somewhat uneasy, but it seems my worries were uncalled for."

Of course, Sakayanagi was referring to how she had manipulated Yamauchi into concentrating all the censure votes on me.

"When you talked to me about delaying our match, I was already ninety-percent certain you were telling the truth. I just didn't trust you completely, so I took some measures of my own, just in case."

"I know. Though, you agree that I didn't break our agreement, right?"

"You didn't do anything that put me at a disadvantage. You didn't lie."

While I had been forced to endure at least some degree of mental stress, if we only consider the outcome, I had ended up with an overwhelming number of praise votes.

No matter how I looked at it, there was no reason for me to hold anything against Sakayanagi.

"Thank you very much."

Sakayanagi bowed her head slightly to show her gratitude.

"Incidentally… Totsuka-kun should've ended up with a total of thirty-eight censure votes, but ultimately only got thirty-six. You voted for him, didn't you?"

"I wasn't certain of anything, but when you said you wanted to have Katsuragi expelled, it felt like it was just a bluff."

In which case, I felt like the chances were higher that she was targeting Yahiko, Katsuragi's supporter, instead.

Even though my vote hadn't changed anything, I had ended up casting it for him anyway.

"How wonderful. As I thought, you're definitely the real deal. The perfect opponent."

“So? Was all of this just your attempt to mess with me?”

“Well… I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t, but there is a reason why I said that I wanted to postpone our match. I mentioned something similar not too long ago, but this provisional exam is undoubtedly something that a certain someone prepared in order to have you expelled from the school. In fact, this someone has already happened to send me a message requesting me to help get you expelled.”

“A message?”

“Yes. It was probably from the same person who had gotten my father temporarily kicked out of office. Originally, they had set up the provisional exam with slightly different rules. The votes that classes would use on each other were going to be censure votes, not praise votes, so there’s no mistaking what their goal was. That would’ve been quite the unreasonable exam, don’t you agree?”

“If that had happened, it wouldn’t matter who the student is, if you were colluded against by the other classes, you’d be forced out of school.”

It would’ve been an unreasonable exam where even Sakayanagi and Ichinose would be at risk if the other classes were out to get them.

“Exactly. It seems the current school staff were vehemently opposed to it and managed to change that part of it. Besides, I would never cooperate with that person anyway. That wouldn’t be any fun at all. That’s why, in order to ensure your safety, I decided to use all of Class A’s praise votes on you. That way, even if someone had been up to something behind the scenes, it would’ve been impossible for you to be expelled.”

“Then, why did you pick Yamauchi? Was it just random chance?”

“Do you not remember? He bumped into me and knocked me over during the Mixed Training Camp. Furthermore, he was quite rude about it.”

Something like that did happen back then.

“It was revenge for that.”

She had targeted him just because of something simple like that?

For Sakayanagi, that alone might've been more than enough of a reason.

"However, all I did was light the fire. In the end, he was burned because he was a burden to his class."

"I guess."

Even if Sakayanagi hadn't interfered with the exam, the end result would've probably been about the same.

"Those were the main reasons I had asked to postpone our match. At the same time, I wouldn't mind seeing my father return to his position so the school can return to normal, but…"

Suddenly, within the empty special building, someone new had arrived.

"Hello hello."

A lone man dressed in a suit appeared before us.

"This is my first time at this school. Do either of you know where the staff room is?"

"If you're looking for the staff room, then you've come to the wrong place. That said, please excuse my lack of manners, but may I know who's asking?"

"My name is Tsukishiro. I'll be working as the acting director of the school for the time being."

He waved his hand politely and gave the two of us a seemingly gentle smile.

He was probably in his forties, somewhere around Sakayanagi's father's age.

"Fufu, is that so? It seems that Mr. Acting Director has quite the poor sense of direction, seeing as how you just so happened to wander

your way here. Or, perhaps… you had decided to pay us a visit after seeing the two of us meet on the security camera last time? This is the same place Ayanokōji-kun and I had used to meet secretly at the beginning of the exam. It wouldn't be very hard for you to come here if you had always been keeping an eye on it."

As she spoke, I recalled the unnatural look Sakayanagi had given the camera last time we were here.

If someone had really been watching us last time, it would've been easy to lure them out next time we came here.

Not only had Sakayanagi thought of this plan ahead of time, but the person in question seemed to have fallen for it.

The acting director simply smiled and ignored what she had been implying.

"You say very interesting things. Though, I suppose I've heard that this is quite the amusing school. I wonder if all the students here are like you? Either way, please, pardon me."

The man proceeded to walk forward, as if he was attempting to walk between the two of us.

"Since you're looking for the staff room, I suggest you go back the way you came. You're in the wrong building."

With the same smile as always, Tsukishiro kicked Sakayangi's cane out from under her as she attempted to give him directions.

Naturally, there was no way for her to react to something so unexpected, so she began to fall over.

With an exclamation of surprise, I quickly reached out and grabbed ahold of her to stop her from falling, only to be immediately met with a strike from his elbow aimed at my body.

Unable to take evasive measures while holding onto Sakayanagi, I was forced to take the blow. I resisted the impact to the best of my ability and let Sakayanagi down to the floor. He came at me again in quick succession, seizing me by the neck and pinning me against the

wall with bewildering, superhuman strength.

“You’re not as good as rumors say, Ayanokōji Kiyotaka-kun.”

He was pressing against my throat so hard that I couldn’t make a sound.

It was hard to imagine his strength based on his outward appearance. It felt like it would be difficult to break free of his hold.

“…You’ve gone and done something quite reprehensible, Mr. Acting Director.”

“I know you were sent instructions to have him expelled, Sakayanagi.”

“So that message was from one of your associates then? Since school officials aren’t able to explicitly force an expulsion, it’s understandable that you would come to rely on someone like me.”

Sakayanagi smiled as she slowly got up from the floor.

“Thank you for helping me, Ayanokōji-kun.”

It would’ve been impossible for Sakayanagi to avoid that given her physical handicap.

There was even a chance that it wouldn’t have ended with just a fall.

“Do you believe your violent behavior against students will go unnoticed, Mr. Acting Director?”

“There’s no need for me to worry about it. The surveillance cameras in this area have been doctored to show dummy footage.”

In other words, no matter what happened, there wouldn’t be any recording of it.

“Now then, Ayanokōji, I have a message from your father. He has no interest in playing this childish game anymore and wants you to come home immediately. How about you blink twice if you understand?”

I was unable to speak a single word, and furthermore, wasn't even given an option to refuse.

This was really something 'that man' would do.

"So you have no intention of making this easy for yourself?"

In response to my complete, unresponsive silence, the acting director began to mumble as he got bored.

"Why don't you show a little bit of resistance? Show me something a normal kid couldn't."

His hold on my throat became even stronger.

He was a thoroughly trained, skilled opponent that an ordinary student wouldn't be able to deal with.

"There's more to you than just observation skills, right? Why don't you show me what else you're capable of?"

He provoked me once again, but I still didn't show a single shred of resistance.

In the end, Tsukishiro realized that I had no intention of fighting back and loosened his grip.

"I officially take office at this school in April. Please do look forward to it."

With that, the man walked out of the special building.

"That was a wise choice, Ayanokōji-kun."

Sakayanagi praised me for putting up with his actions and restraining myself from fighting back.

"He's the acting director. Had I chosen to retaliate, I don't know how he would've used it against me."

He said that the surveillance cameras had been doctored to show dummy footage, but there was no guarantee he hadn't recorded

everything anyway. It would've been checkmate for me if I fought back and only his violent behavior was edited out from the video.

"Are you hurt?"

"Don't worry. I'm used to stuff like this. More importantly, Sakayanagi…"

"Yes? What is it?"

"Let's officially have our match in the next exam."

As I spoke, Sakayanagi's eyes seemed to widen in surprise.

"I never expected that you would say that sort of thing to me face-to-face."

"If that man is going to be involved starting in April, I don't think I can afford to compete with you for very long. I'll make it obvious to you where things stand and leave it with that."

"That's fine with me. I won't need a second or third time. I will gladly accept the privilege of being your opponent."

The final exam of the first year would begin soon, and that would mark the end of the confrontation Sakayanagi was hoping for.

Part 9

Monday.

Amongst the students, at least some of them were probably wondering if Yamauchi would still be here.

Wondering if the expulsion had been nothing more than a bluff.

However, reality was not so merciful.

Since the events of the weekend, the number of desks in the classroom had decreased by one.

Yamauchi Haruki's place was already long gone.

The smile on Hirata's face had faded.

The smile on Kushida's face had too.

Neither Sudō nor Ike looked particularly energetic.

"-Without any further ado, I will now announce the final special exam."

Just like that, the first year's Class C advanced toward their final special examination.

Afterword

Howdy! How is everyone? Happy new year! This is an inexplicable afterword that I wrote in the middle of the night, and I'm quite excited to share it with you.

Yes. Every year that goes by, it becomes harder and harder to stay up late. Back when I was a teenager, it was easy for me to stay up for two days (48 hours) straight! It's hard to believe I can boast about something so trivial. Rather, I've only been awake for 20 hours now and I'm already about to die, how did it come to this?

Make sure you sleep at least six hours every day.

Indeed. Oh yeah, with this volume, the first year is now over…

It's over… NOT!

In the previous afterword, I had said the first year would come to an end in Volume 10, but it's still not over!

This is because, to tell you the truth, when I began working on Volume 10, I had intended to include both the provisional exam and the final exam, but the former ended up using far more pages than I had planned. There was no way to cram everything into one volume, so it just turned out this way.

While this volume ended up thicker than I expected, the next one will absolutely be the end of their first year. After that, there will be a one-volume interval (Volume 11.5) that takes place before the start of the second year.

My plans always seem to change after I announce something in the afterword, so I'm a little anxious, but… I try not to think about that.

Unlike these light novels, this past year feels like it has gone by so quickly! It feels like 2018 arrived only just yesterday, and it was

already 2019 in the blink of an eye (The year at which this volume was released). It's unbelievable.

Despite wanting to increase my writing speed from one volume every four months to one volume every 3 months, I haven't been able to successfully make it happen these past several years, which is frustrating. Either way, I always aim for a three-month timespan.

Last year, just like always, I was helped by both my illustrator, Tomose, and my editor. I'm going to rely on you guys even more in 2019 as well, so please continue to do everything you do!

Therefore, to you, the reader, please continue to support both me and this work in the future.

-Kinugasa

Short Stories

SS Ichinose Honami: Apparent difficulty

A short distance from the dorms.

I was standing by the shadow of a vending machine letting out a breath of fog.

«It's still so cold~».

It was morning and time to go to school. A cold morning in March was inviting the coming of spring. I had wanted to talk to a certain person so much this morning so I decided to wait until I could see his back.

It would have been warmer to wait in the lobby but I felt it would have been embarrassing to ambush him. In the end I decided to lay it low hiding instead.

«… Being called out by my other friends would be… a bit».

With this excuse, I had already waited about ten minutes.

Can he come over quickly please? With these thoughts in mind, I felt my pulse steadily rising along with the time ticking away.

U—

If I knew it would be like this, I wished I'd rather contacted him and asked to meet up in the first place.

The thought that I should so suddenly and coincidently call out to him was a mistake. My bad.

Maybe I should stop with the ambushing thing and just do it normally? Well then, where and when should I call out to him then?

But…

I wanted to meet and talk to him today, no matter what.

Remembering the exchange with Nagumo-senpai yesterday, I felt I wanted to overwrite it somehow.

Then in the corner of my line of sight, I discovered my objective walking by. It was Ayanokouji-kun.

«Good morning— Ayanokouji-kun!».

Leaving it up to flow of events I walked closer while greeting.

«Ah. Good morning, Ichinose».

Noticing me voice, he turned around and replied. Despite his blank look on his face, seeing his usual self, I…

I stiffened up.

«Hmm?».

Yahoo—! A greeting pose followed with my body stiffening.

I remembered I hadn't decided what to talk about at all.

Usually I went with the flow or the mood when I talked with my friends after all.

However, today have been the only day I thought about deciding on a topic beforehand.

But that's way too late now. Having already called out to him, I just have to make it work somehow.

«What is it?».

Showing some worry from seeing me standing there as if petrified, Ayanokouji-kun called out to me.

As if breaking out of a movement restricting spell, I decided to start with a certain template I've been using frequently.

«Yaa, well, it's cold today, right—?»

The topic being about the recent weather due to this March being

unusually cold.

«Sure is».

The weather was somewhat weird, making it easy to mistake that one was living in Snow Country.

«Did you plan to go to school with someone?»

Wanting to confirm it, just in case, I asked him.

«No, not at all. I'm basically alone in the mornings».

That was a relief. If someone was going to just show up impromptu here and now, Ayanokouji-kun would probably be troubled.

«Well then… Want to go together?».

Hearing this Ayanokouji-kun nodded without hesitation.

Ah—that went well.

«……»

Ah— it should have anyway…

The topic, I can't find anything! Realising how I wasn't being my usual self, his expression showed how troubled he was.

I felt talking like we usually do was getting harder. There was a strange change going on within myself.

As expected, deciding to talk with him proved to be the right choice after all.

With these firm thoughts in my head, I began walking by his side.

SS Horikita Suzune: Neighbour

He walked past me and stood in front of Kouenji-kun. It seems they were talking about something in low voices. I didn't hear what they were saying though. I saw him leaving the classroom, seeing his back I felt something I couldn't express inside me. Before I noticed, I was standing up from my seat and followed after him. Ayanokouji-kun was walking further down the corridor. His walking pace wasn't especially fast, but it felt like I would never reach it no matter what. Rushing it, I grabbed his hand without thinking. I didn't have confidence my words alone could stop him somehow. He turned around. His pupils had no colour. But he was someone who didn't show his emotions at all, black nor white. During the span of one year beside him, I couldn't see anything.

«Ayanokouji-kun. You… since when and how much did you know?»

So I asked him. What I wanted to know. What I needed to know. He didn't seem to worry, nor did he change his facial expressions when he answered.

«Haven't I said it before? I haven't participated in this special exam in the literal sense».

No matter how much I knocked on his door, the knock coming back was the same as always. That's why I have been distancing myself slightly from him lately. Since I feared getting closer to him.

«… But…».

I don't know.

I can't see the person behind Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun.

«I'll leave then».

After his reply, I didn't manage to hold him there any further. I could only watch him going farther away.

I felt I managed to grow up a bit during this exam. But in the end, I couldn't grab his existence itself.

«By the way».

I heard a voice coming from behind me which surprised me before I turned around.

It was my classmate Karuizawa-san.

«…What is it?».

«Nothing. I was just wondering what you were talking about».

«Not much. It seems he isn't trusting me, that's all».

«Hmm…»

She then looked at Ayanokouji-kun once just like I did moments earlier.

«It seems like he is trusting you, far more than me».

«What makes you say so?».

Of course I didn't have any proof.

But, I somehow knew it from seeing Karuizawa's eyes.

«Since it looks like you are trusting him, perhaps? I can't seem to trust him no matter what though».

That was the only answer I could come up with. I wonder what she would say after hearing that.

«You cannot trust someone who isn't trusting you, right?»

«!…»

I flinched from the unexpected, yet precise and obvious words directed at me.

«If I really start to trust him… One day I feel I will witness something

scary. I feel like I will be betrayed».

«Ah is that so? I can't understand since I no longer have anything to fear anymore».

Karuizawa didn't seem scared at all.

«I thought you were really amazing yesterday. You got a bit of my respect, seeing you take the initiative for the class. But Kiyotaka is a different matter altogether. If you are that scared, your relationship with him will never begin».

Karuizawa answered before returning back and joining her friends.

Her word would remain deep in my heart forever. Together with the existence of an invisible neighbour.

SS Sakayanagi Arisu

A space for only me and Ayanokouji was spreading before my eyes. He was wearing his usual poker face as always, watching me steadily.

«To think you would even send Kamuro away first, what did you want to talk about?»

It seems like he wanted to finish this conversation as soon as possible, pushing for a quick conclusion. As for me, I'd have liked to talk more leisurely, but seeing as we are enemies, that won't be possible.

«It's about this special exam».

«Correct me if I'm wrong, but we decided to fight it out during the next special exam, right?».

«Yes. That was the plan. However… if it's alright with you, can we settle it during the next one? This is not a fight between classes, but eliminating someone from your own. Since the only thing outsiders can do to influence the results is by giving praising points, you can't attack at all either… do you mind if we postpone to the next time?».

I wonder how he will answer my self-indulgent suggestion?

After a brief silence, I decided to ask again.

«Won't you accept, this deal?»

Having reached a conclusion it seems, he replied back.

«It's up to you».

In other words, we will ignore this special exam and settle it during the next one. That's something I'm really thankful for.

«Thank you. I was wondering what would happen if you were determined that this special was as good as any. I can thus freely concentrate on the internal matters of class A. It's just…»

«Just?».

Since we just had delayed our duel, there was a need to remind him of this.

«Since this is a temporary ceasefire, I will certainly need to earn your trust, thus why I say this. During this exam I won't give you any minus points. In other words, I will definitely not give you any criticism votes».

Yes. There is a need to clearly show that we won't fight during this exam. I don't think he will be caught off guard but this is an action meant to instil the sense of rightfulness.

«On the off chance that any involvement of mine with class C results in any harm to you… I don't mind if we consider that my loss. I'm fine with you rejecting the coming exam too».

«If I get most of the criticism votes this time, there won't be a next time though».

«Certainly. Anyway, please rest assured, is what I have to say».

In any case, I wonder if that may give him some peace of mind?

However, this means I can freely use «that» without reserve.

I can't help but looking forward to the results after the exam has ended.

At that time, let's settle this between us, Ayanokouji-kun.

SS Ichinose Honami: Small heartbeats

The time crept closer towards midnight. I've been hanging around in the rooms of several boys from Class B before, but staying at a boy's room at this hour was a first for me.

Furthermore, being alone together with a boy like now was obviously something I haven't experienced yet.

We were done discussing the topic I had to talk about.

I just have to drink this cup of hot chocolate I held in my hands before returning back.

«Hey, Ayanokouji-kun».

I stared at the cup while calling out to him.

«Hmm?»

He replied back with the blank face he always had, or pretty close to it, as I could feel a sense of composure from it.

«Ayanokouji-kun, are you perhaps someone really amazing?».

«What makes you think so? Sorry, but that's something I'm not aware of».

«That's even more amazing if so. I mean, Ayanokouji-kun…»

You saved Sakura-san. The actions you took during the special exam aboard the cruiser. How fast you were during the sports festival…

Yes, that's right. There's no doubt about it.

This person, Ayanokouji-kun is a very intelligent person.

I can't come up with an example but… I can't come up with words to explain how great he seems to be…

Isn't he a person we should be way, way more cautious of than Horikita-san or Hirata-kun after all?

But if that's true…

«What is it?».

«No, nothing at all».

I was assaulted with the feeling of something tightening inside me and averted my eyes.

He will surely become a formidable enemy.

And then, we will be unable to spend time and laugh together like this anymore.

I have to remember this fact.

I know. I know that this is inevitable due to the school rules. The fact that we are in separate classes is something we can't fight. I will prepare myself for that time.

But now, only for now… I want to talk to him just like a normal girl.

«… what's this, I wonder…».

This, strange feeling.

Even though I was talking to him just recently, just as usual.

For some reason, I could feel my heart beating softly.

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